

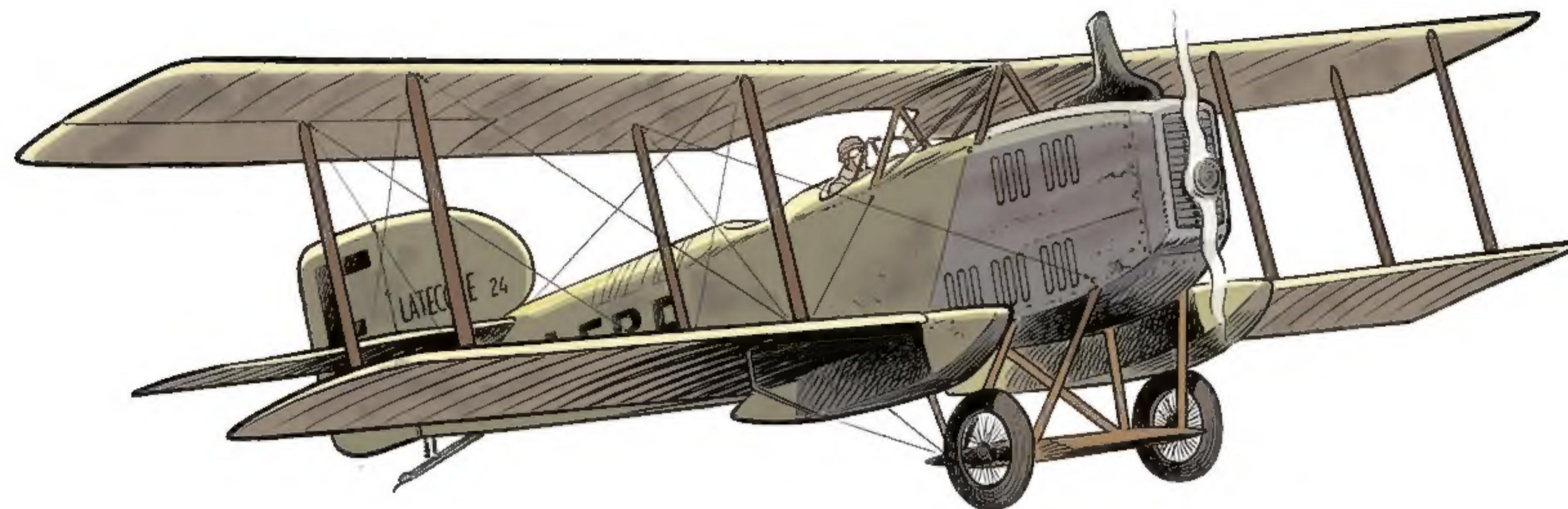
KRAEHN · MILLIEN

THE AVIATOR

3. Airmail to Africa



EuRoPe
COMICS



THE AVIATOR

3. Airmail to Africa

WRITER

JEAN-CHARLES KRAEHN

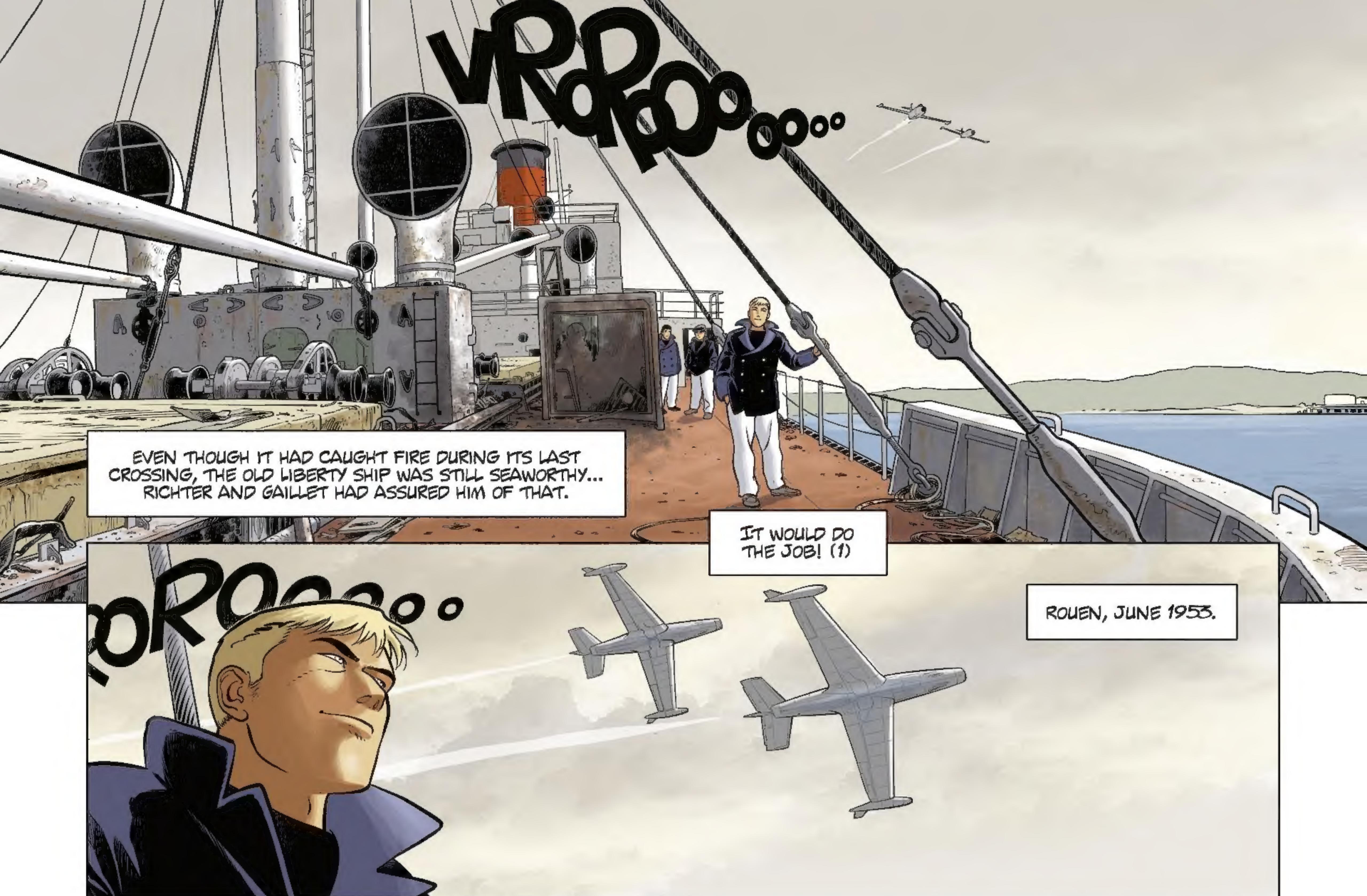
ARTIST

CHRYS MILLIEN

COLORIST

PATRICIA JAMBERS



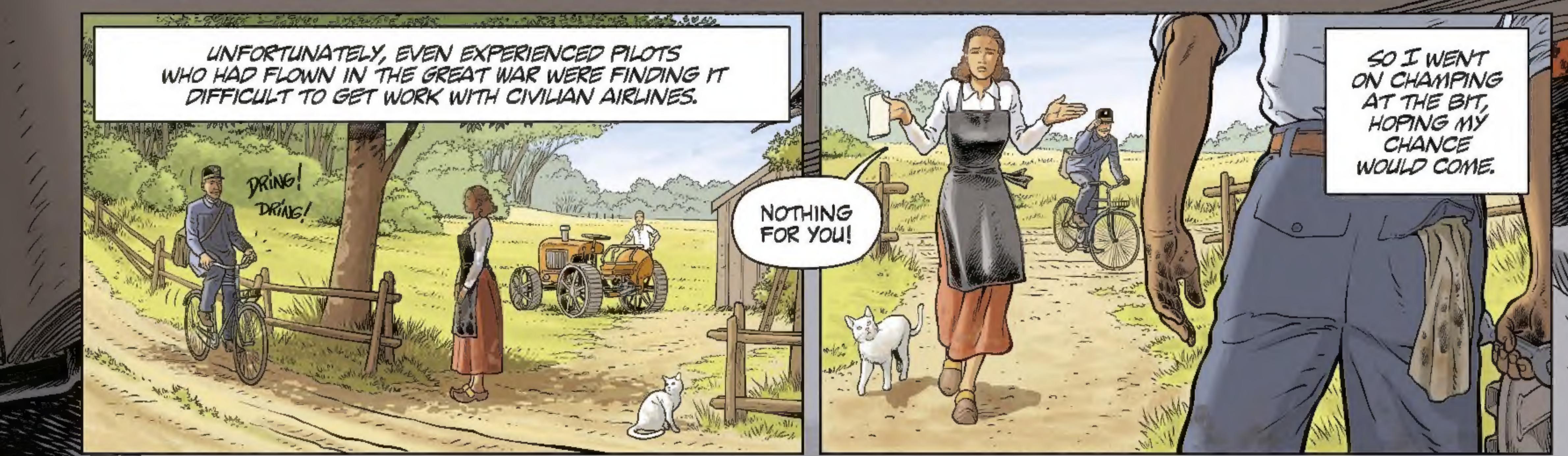
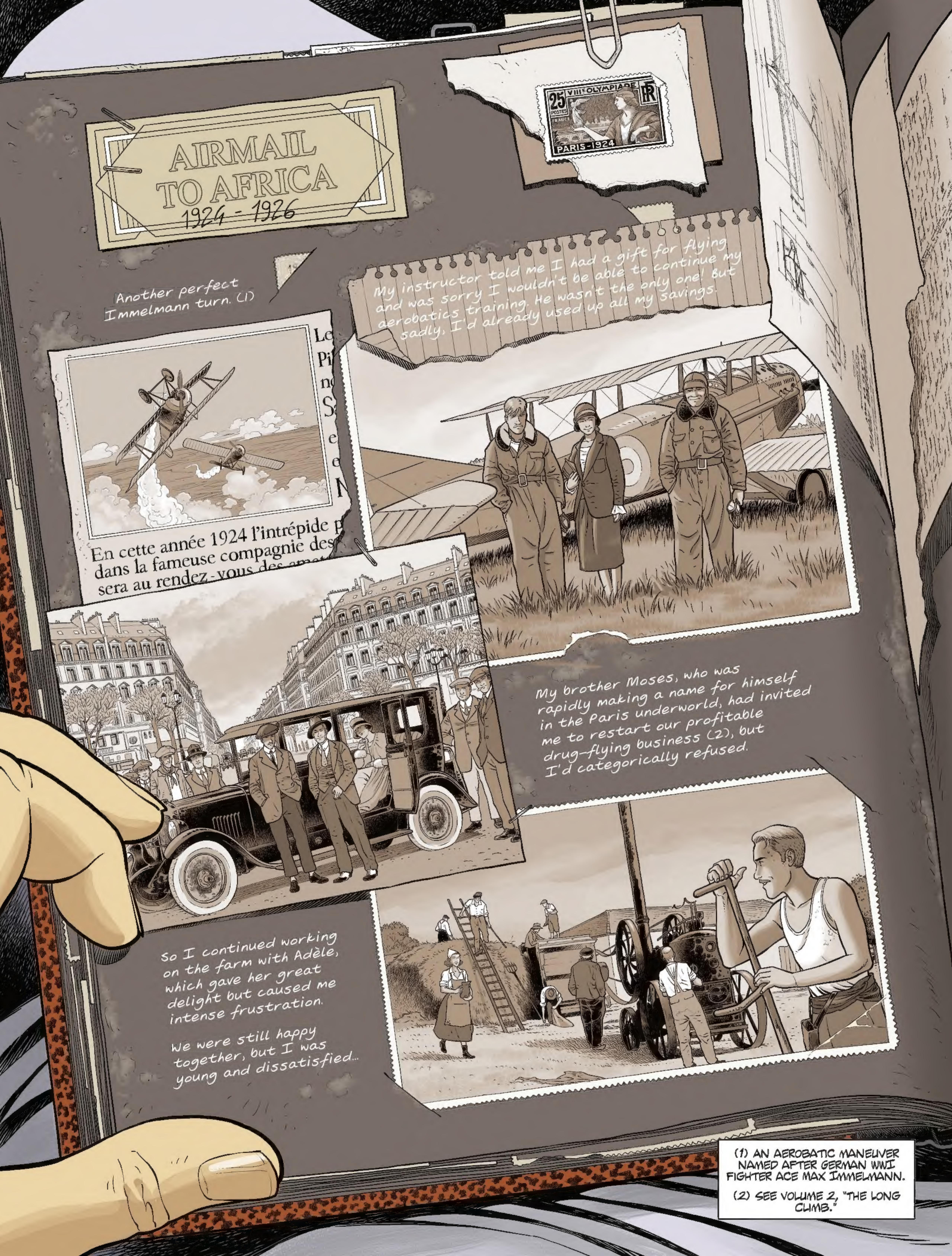


NOW THAT HE'D MADE HIS DECISION, YANN CALEC FELT SUDDENLY RELIEVED, AND HIS THOUGHTS FLEW WITH THE PLANES OVERHEAD-- BACK TO INDOCHINA. IT WAS THE GOLD HE'D BROUGHT BACK FROM TONKIN (2) THAT HAD ENABLED HIM TO BUY THIS SHIP...



(1) SEE VOLUME 10 OF THE TRAMP SERIES, "THE CURSED FREIGHTER."

(2) SEE TRAMP VOLUME 9, "THE TREASURE OF TONKIN."



AND THEN, ONE DAY, IT DID
COME--BUT IN THE MOST
UNEXPECTED WAY.

RHEU!
RHEU!

MY OLD BUDDY OSCAR (1), ADELE'S COUSIN,
HAD GOTTEN A JOB AS A MECHANIC WITH A FLYING
CIRCUS--ONE OF MANY SMALL TEAMS OF AEROBATIC
PILOTS THAT WERE TOURING THE COUNTRY, GIVING
PERFORMANCES AND OFFERING PEOPLE THE CHANCE TO
REALIZE THEIR DREAM OF FLYING THROUGH THE AIR.

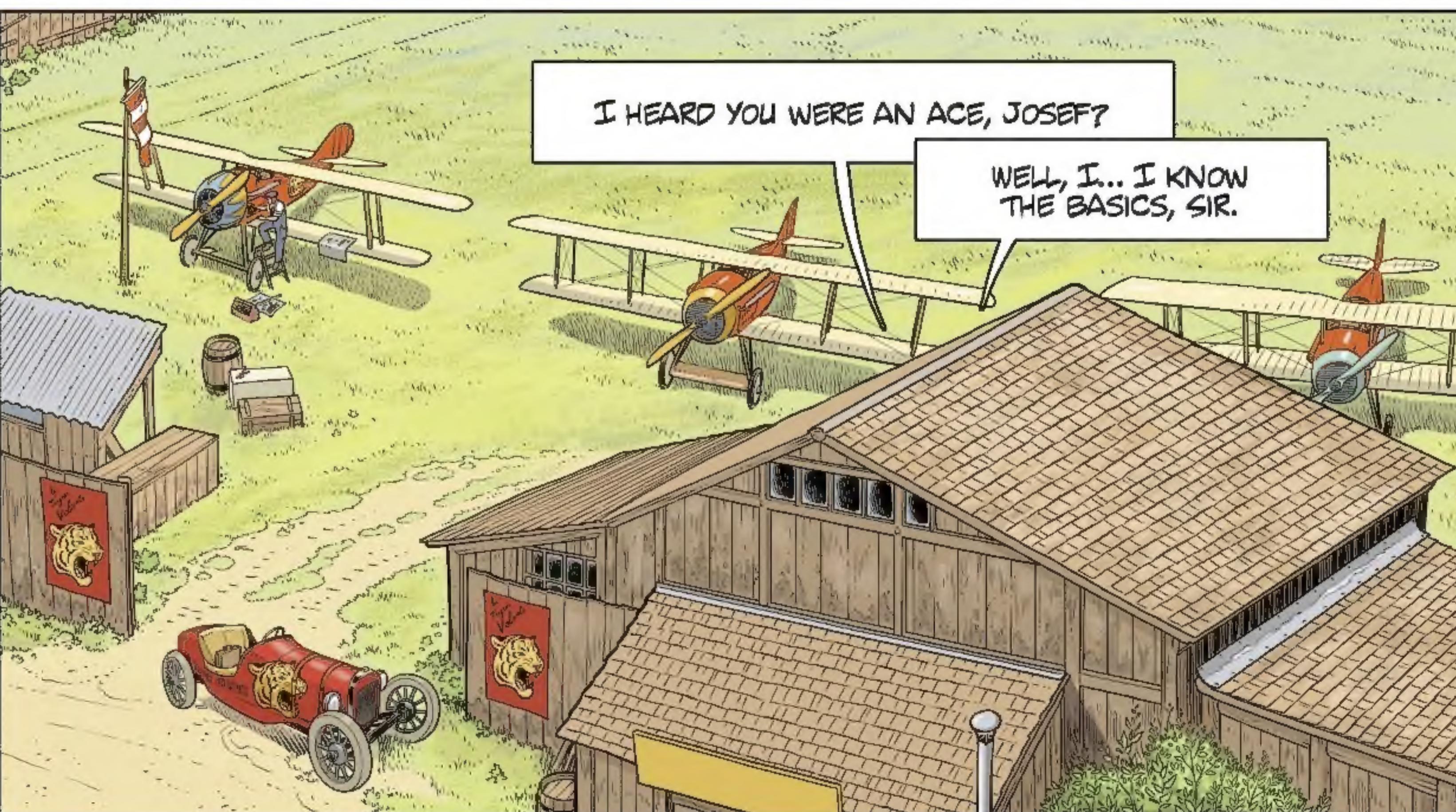
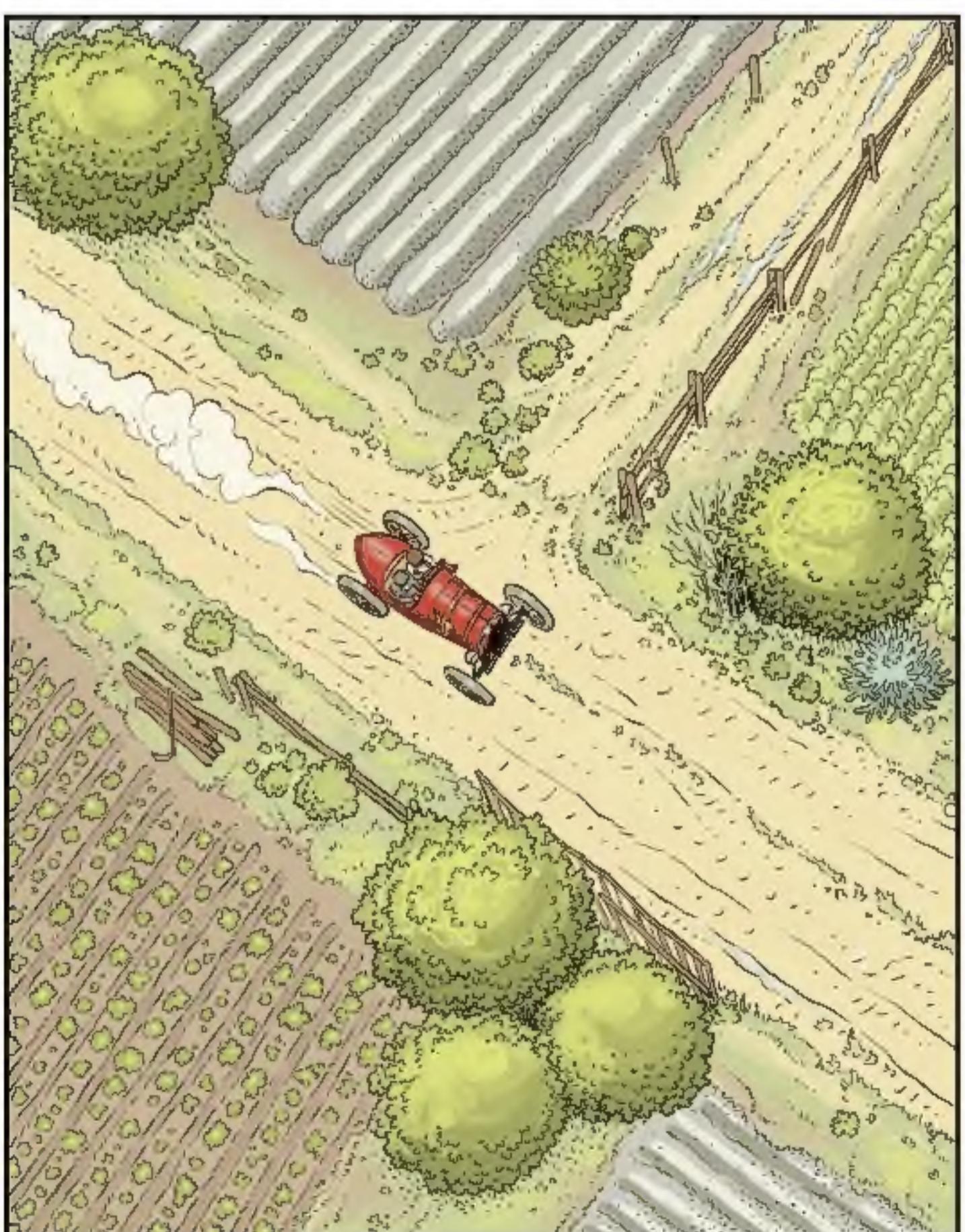
IT'S ONLY TEMPORARY, ADELE. JUST FOR THREE MONTHS, UNTIL
THE OTHER PILOT'S RECOVERED... I'LL SEND YOU SOME MONEY,
AND YOU CAN TAKE ON A LABORER IF YOU NEED TO.

BUT THEY'RE DANGEROUS,
THESE CIRCUSES...

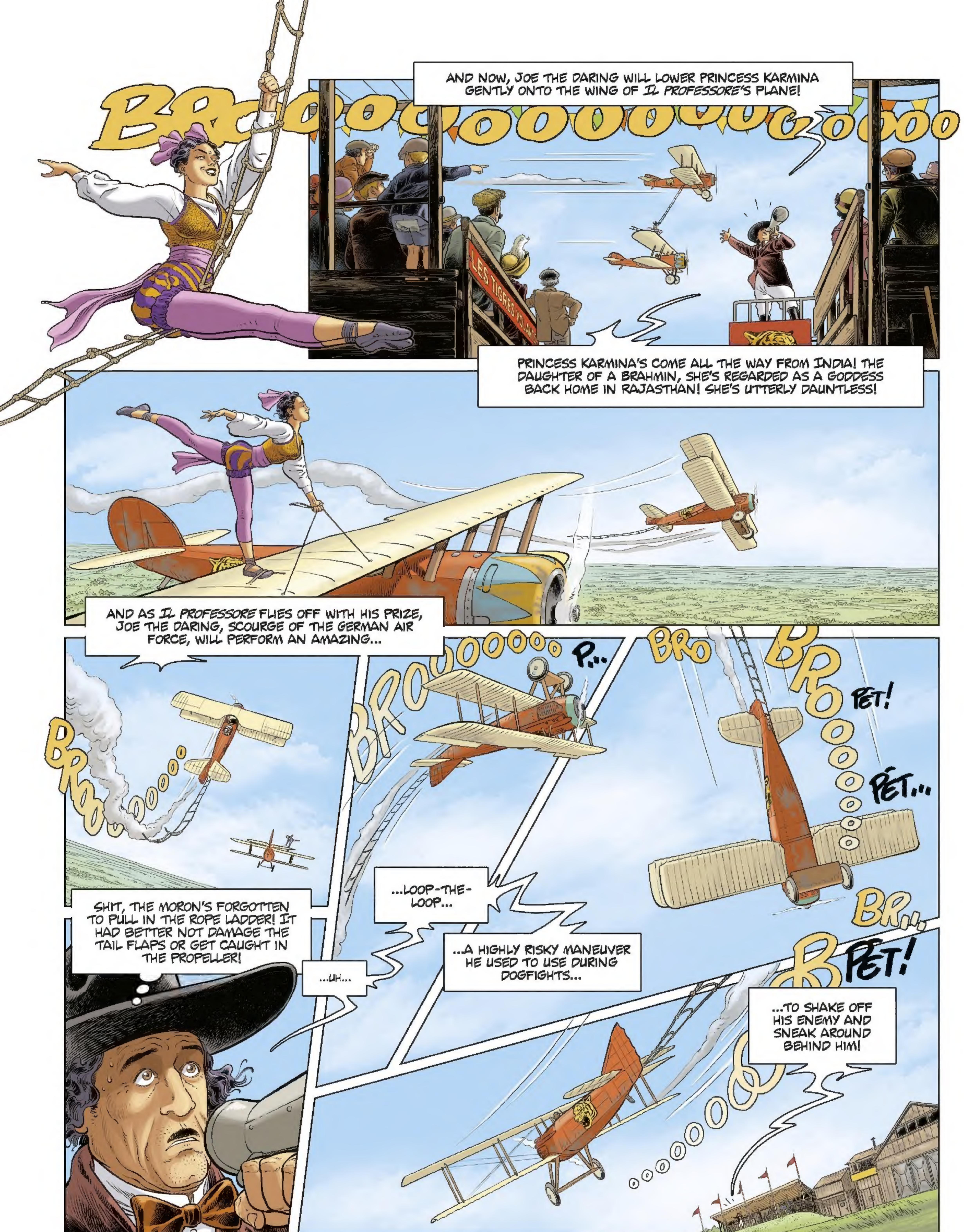
I HATE
OSCAR!

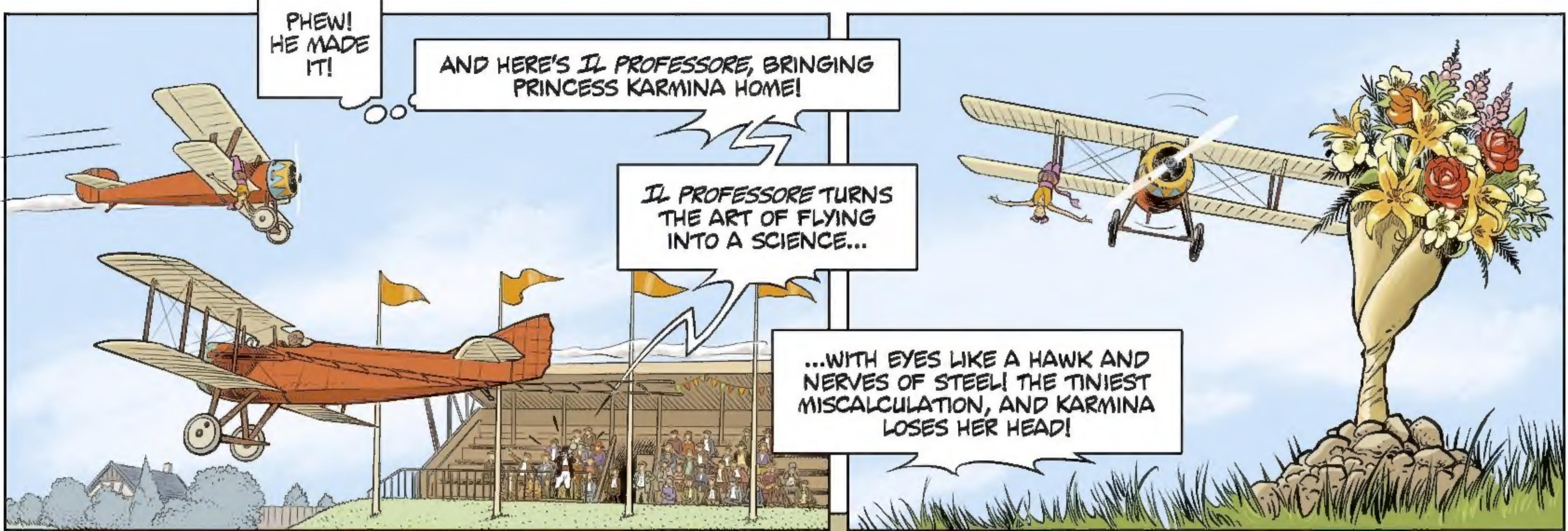
I HEARD YOU WERE AN ACE, JOSEF?

WELL, I... I KNOW
THE BASICS, SIR.









IL PROFESSORE TURNS
THE ART OF FLYING
INTO A SCIENCE...

...WITH EYES LIKE A HAWK AND
NERVES OF STEEL! THE TINIEST
MISCALCULATION, AND KARMINA
LOSES HER HEAD!

BUT HE'S A GREAT
ROMANTIC AND ALWAYS
OFFERS HIS WOMEN
FLOWERS!!

THE SENTIMENTAL STUNT HAD THE CROWD
CHEERING WILDLY IN THE STANDS.

IT WAS
FOLLOWED BY
OTHERS, IN
WHICH THE
PRINCESS...

...AGAIN DEMONSTRATED
HER AMAZING SKILL...

...AND BREATHTAKING FEARLESSNESS!

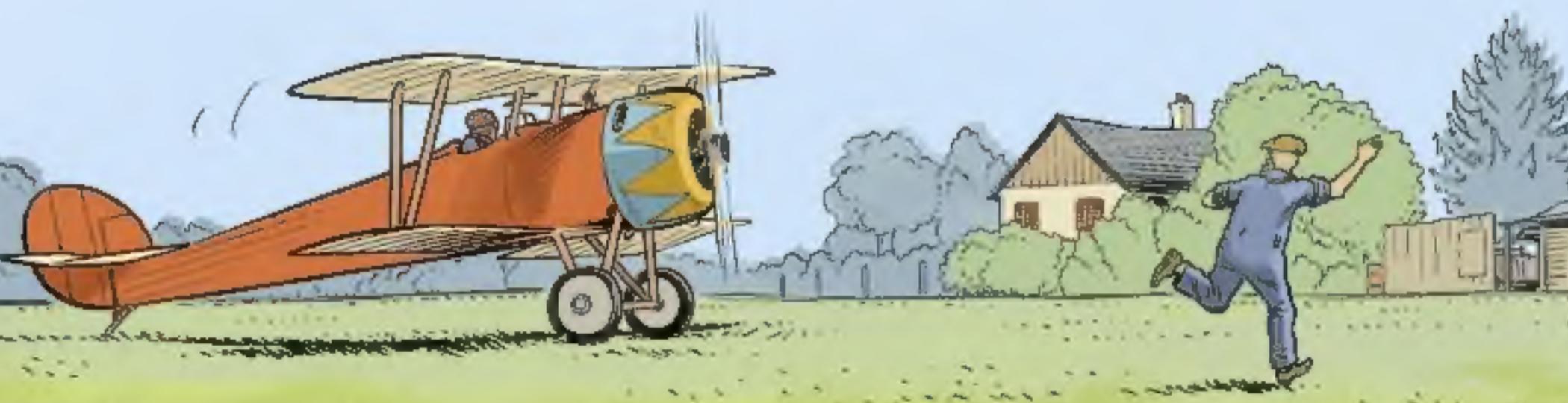
BROOOOOOO

BROOOOOOO

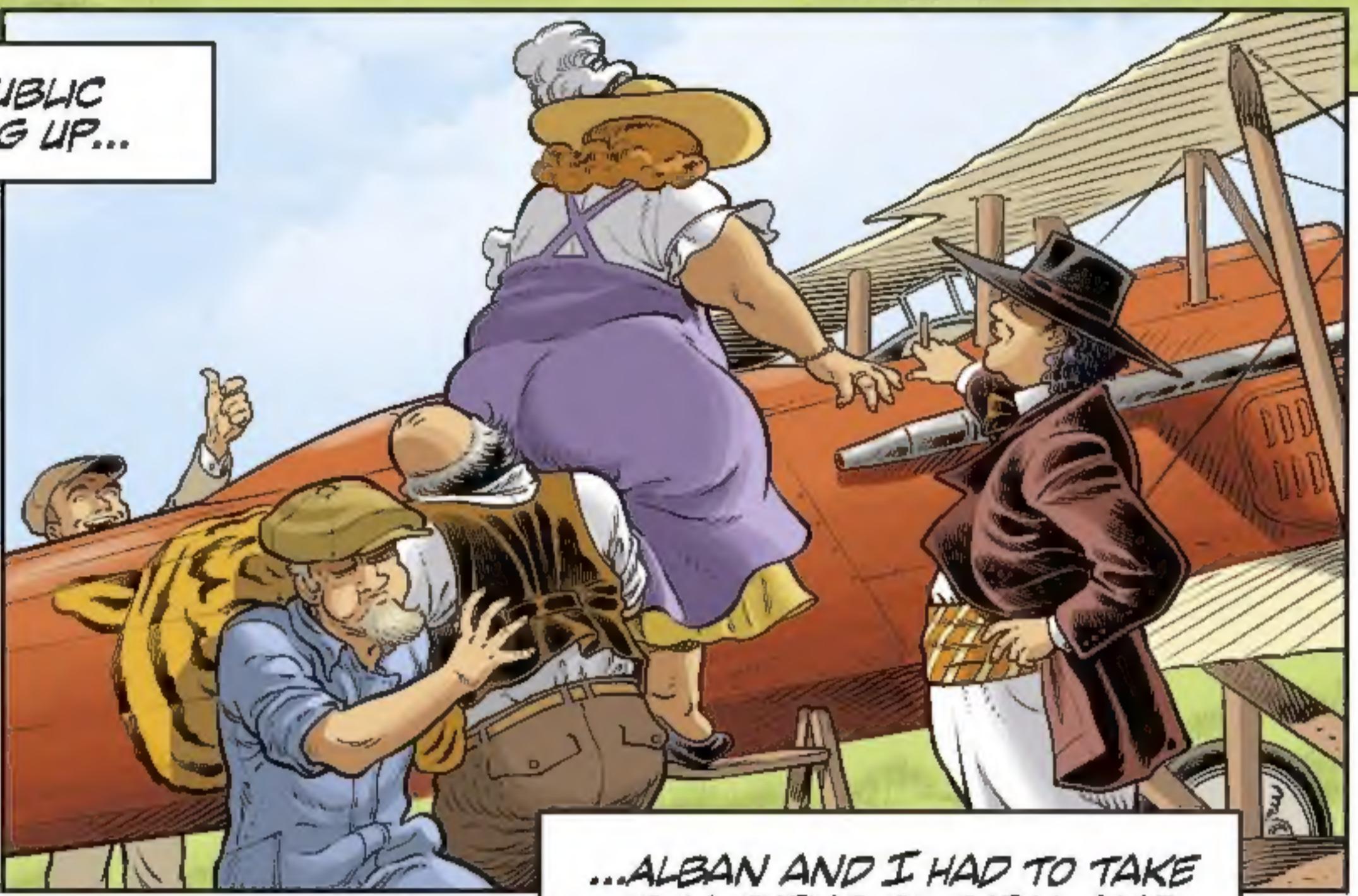




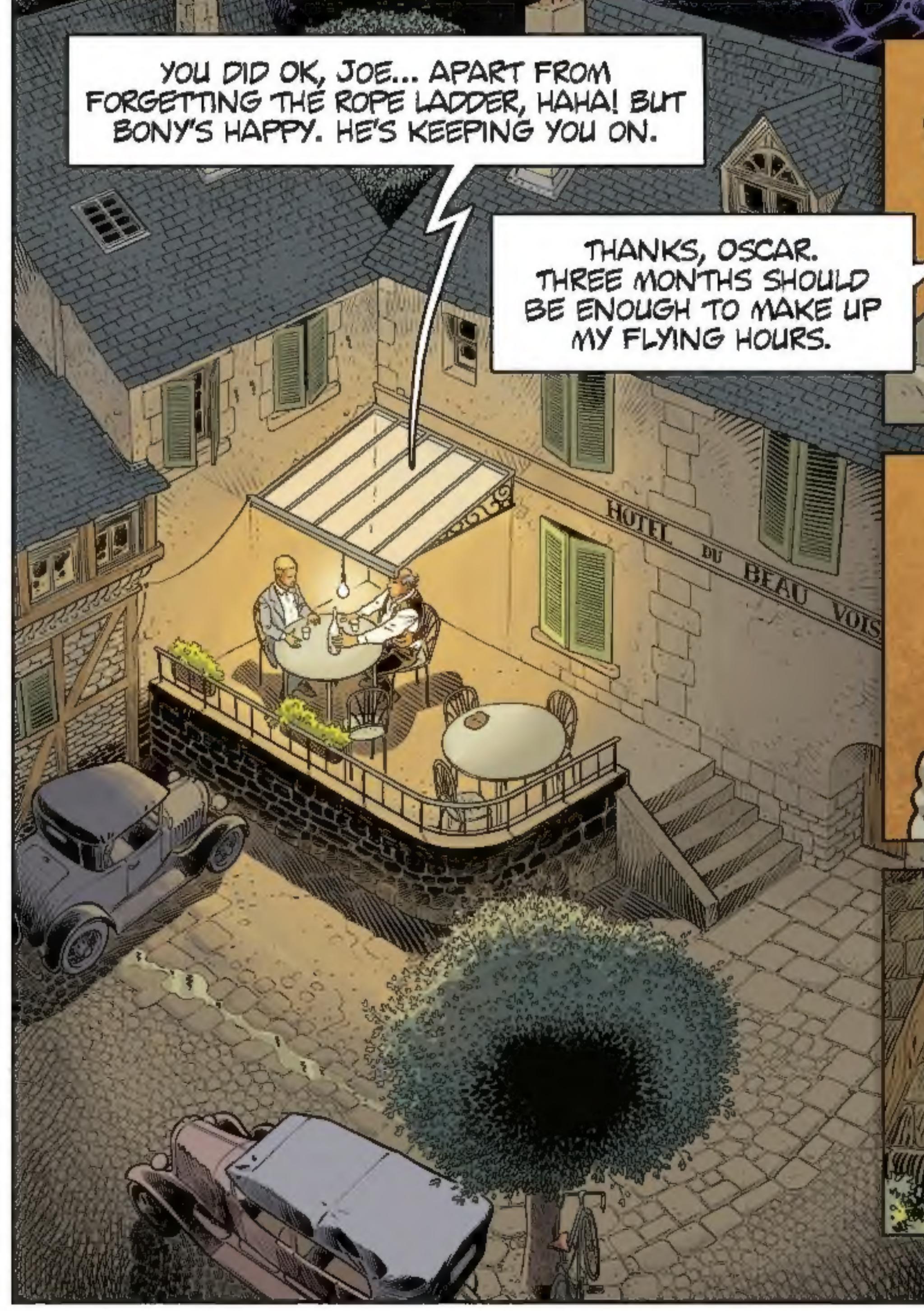
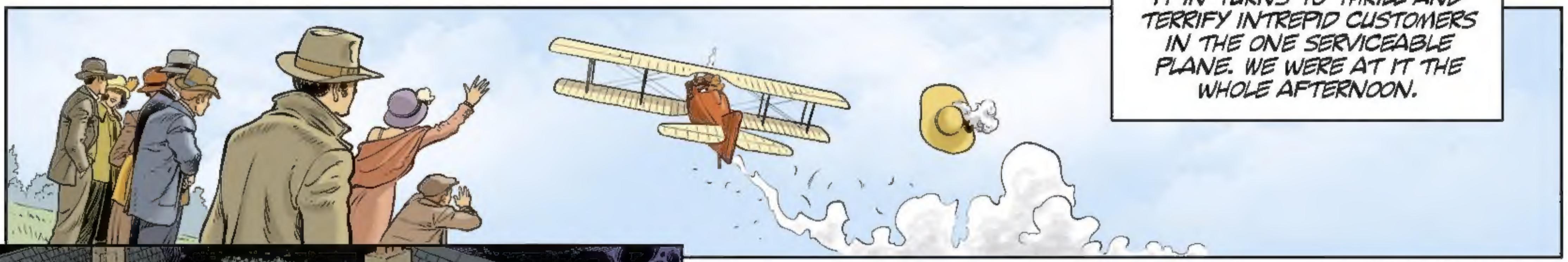
NORMALLY, THE DISPLAY ENDED WITH A HIGHLY DANGEROUS BALLOON-BURSTING CONTEST, BUT SINCE I'D NEVER DONE IT BEFORE, BONY CANCELED IT.



THEN CAME THE MOST PROFITABLE PART OF THE SHOW--THE PUBLIC FLIGHTS. SINCE THE ENGINE ON ONE OF THE SPADS WAS PLAYING UP...



...ALBAN AND I HAD TO TAKE IT IN TURNS TO THRILL AND TERRIFY INTREPID CUSTOMERS IN THE ONE SERVICEABLE PLANE. WE WERE AT IT THE WHOLE AFTERNOON.



YOU DID OK, JOE... APART FROM FORGETTING THE ROPE LADDER, HAHA! BUT BONY'S HAPPY. HE'S KEEPING YOU ON.

THANKS, OSCAR. THREE MONTHS SHOULD BE ENOUGH TO MAKE UP MY FLYING HOURS.



NOT JUST THREE MONTHS, JOE!

YOU HEARD WHAT HAPPENED: THE GUY YOU'RE REPLACING WON'T BE COMING BACK, AND THE OTHER PILOT GOT THE BOOT TEN DAYS AGO.

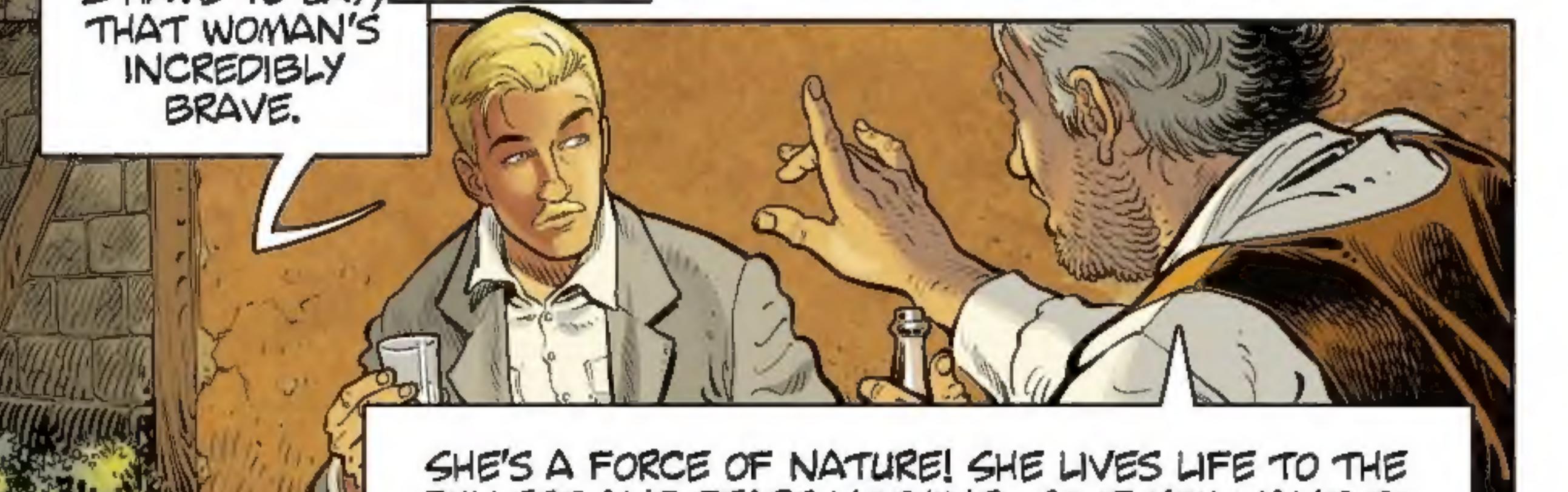
OH? WHY'S THAT?



HE PERFORMED ONE TOO MANY STUNTS--BONY CAUGHT HIM DOING ACROBATICS WITH PRINCESS KARMINA... IN A HAYSTACK!

I HAVE TO SAY, THAT WOMAN'S INCREDIBLY BRAVE.

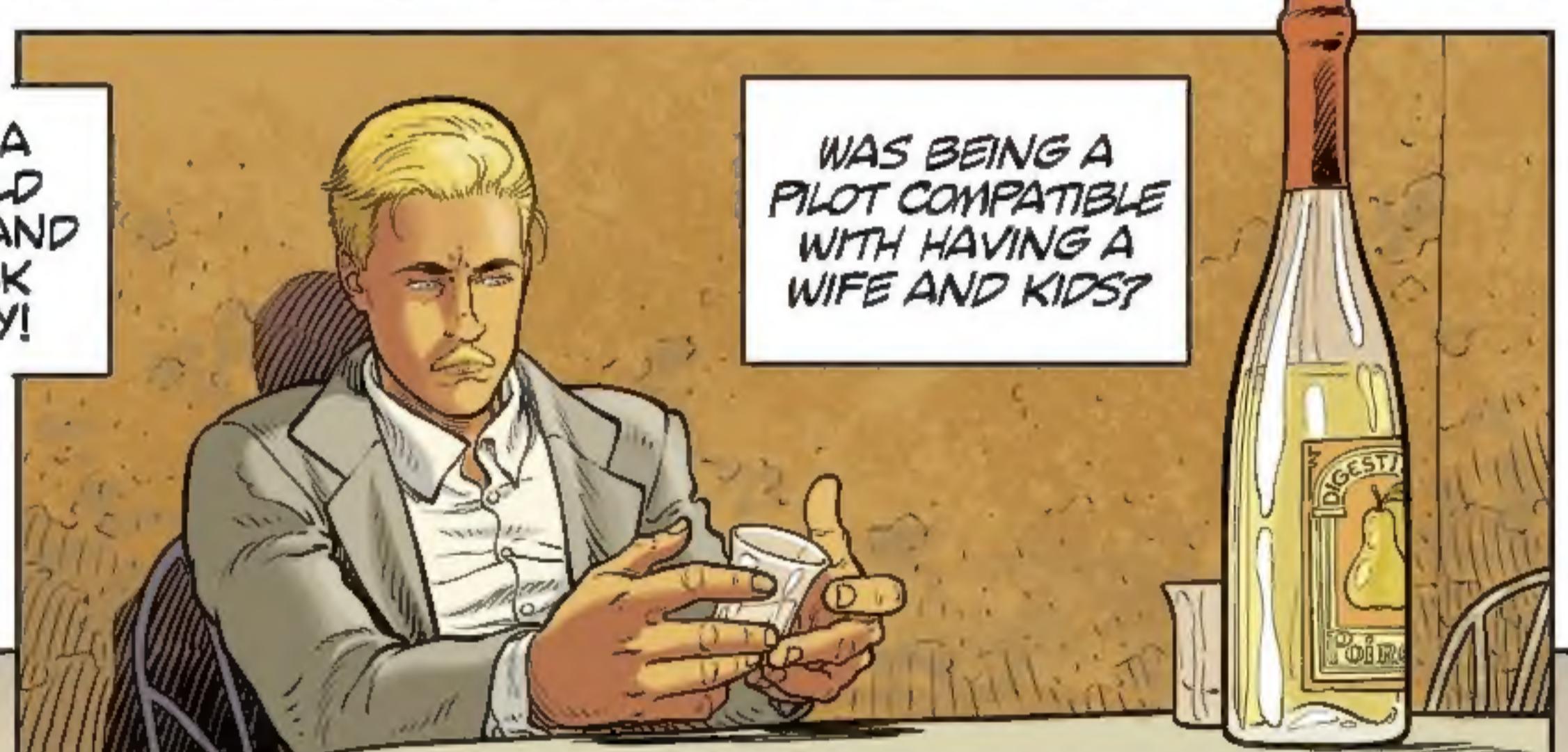
I SEE...



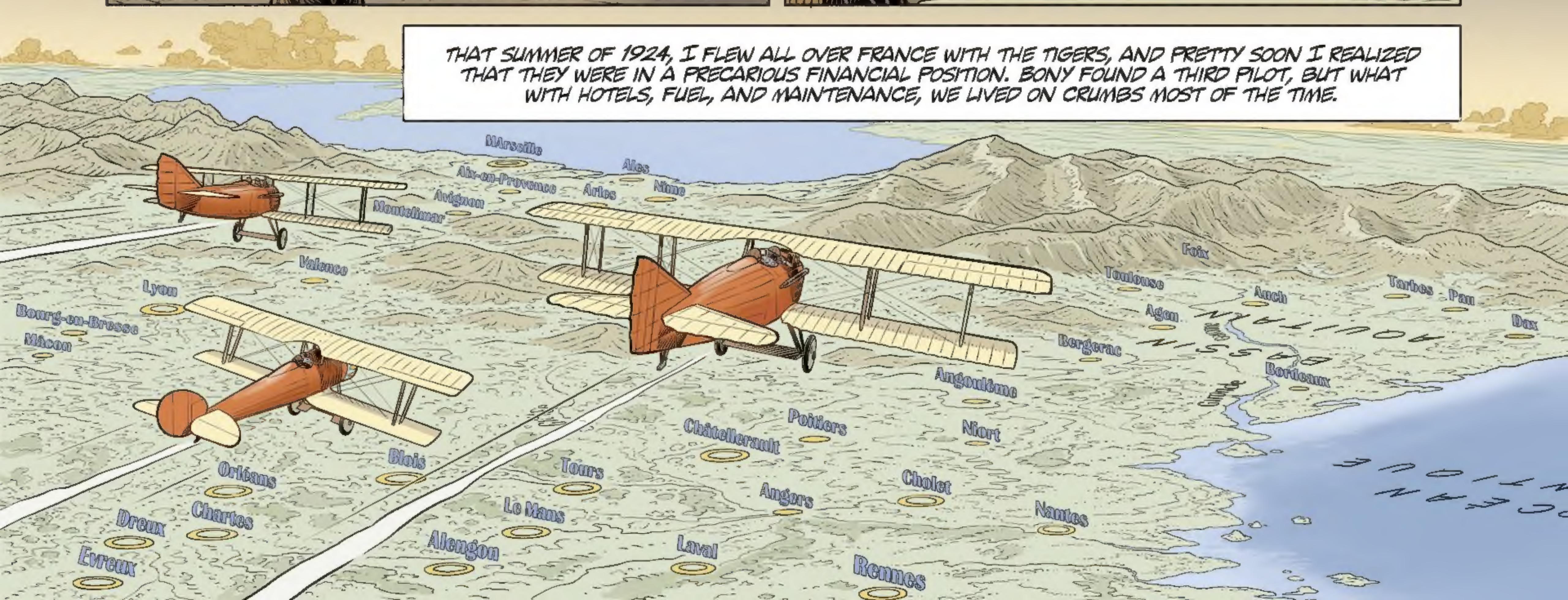
SHE'S A FORCE OF NATURE! SHE LIVES LIFE TO THE FULLEST AND FEARS NOTHING. SO IF YOU WANT TO STAY WITH THE FLYING TIGERS, WATCH OUT FOR HER!



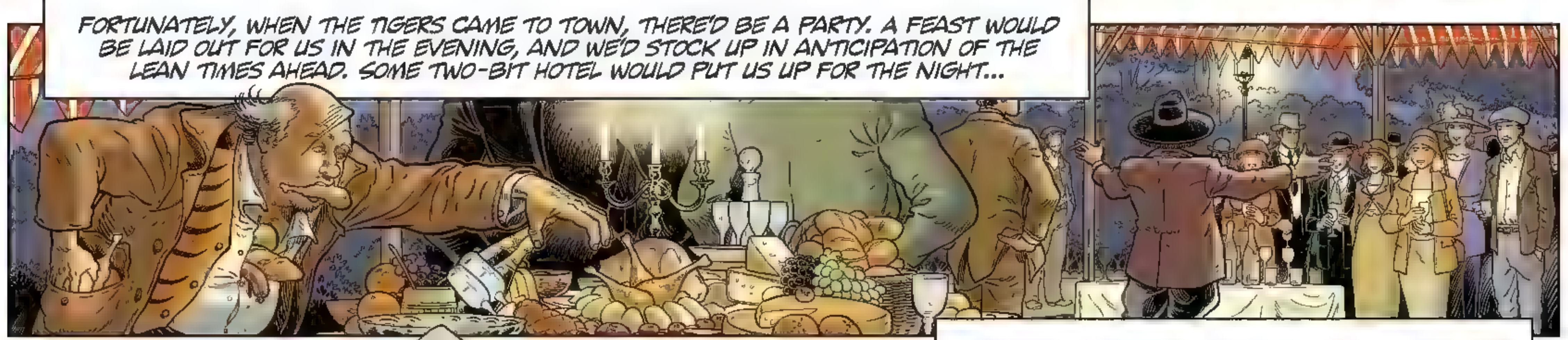
IF YOU BECOME A PROFESSIONAL PILOT, SHE CAN GET SOMEONE TO MANAGE THE FARM AND COME LIVE WITH YOU.



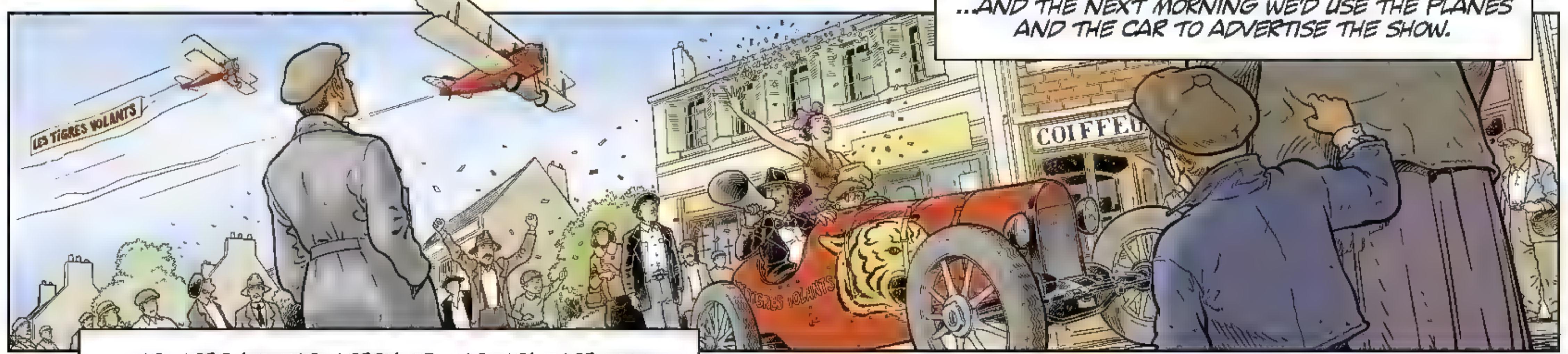
THAT SUMMER OF 1924, I FLEW ALL OVER FRANCE WITH THE TIGERS, AND PRETTY SOON I REALIZED THAT THEY WERE IN A PRECARIOUS FINANCIAL POSITION. BONY FOUND A THIRD PILOT, BUT WHAT WITH HOTELS, FUEL, AND MAINTENANCE, WE LIVED ON CRUMBS MOST OF THE TIME.



FORTUNATELY, WHEN THE TIGERS CAME TO TOWN, THERE'D BE A PARTY. A FEAST WOULD BE LAID OUT FOR US IN THE EVENING, AND WE'D STOCK UP IN ANTICIPATION OF THE LEAN TIMES AHEAD. SOME TWO-BIT HOTEL WOULD PUT US UP FOR THE NIGHT...



...AND THE NEXT MORNING WE'D USE THE PLANES AND THE CAR TO ADVERTISE THE SHOW.



WE WERE AT THE MERCY OF THE WEATHER, TOO. NO SUN, AND THE TAKINGS WOULD BE LOW. RAIN OR HIGH WINDS, AND IT WAS A DISASTER.



I WENT BACK TO THE FARM TO SEE ADELE WHEN I COULD, BUT I WASN'T EARNING ENOUGH TO ASK HER TO TRAVEL WITH ME. AND IN THE END, SHE JUST GOT FED UP WITH IT. IT WAS A DIFFICULT TIME--ESPECIALLY FOR HER, I HAVE TO ADMIT.

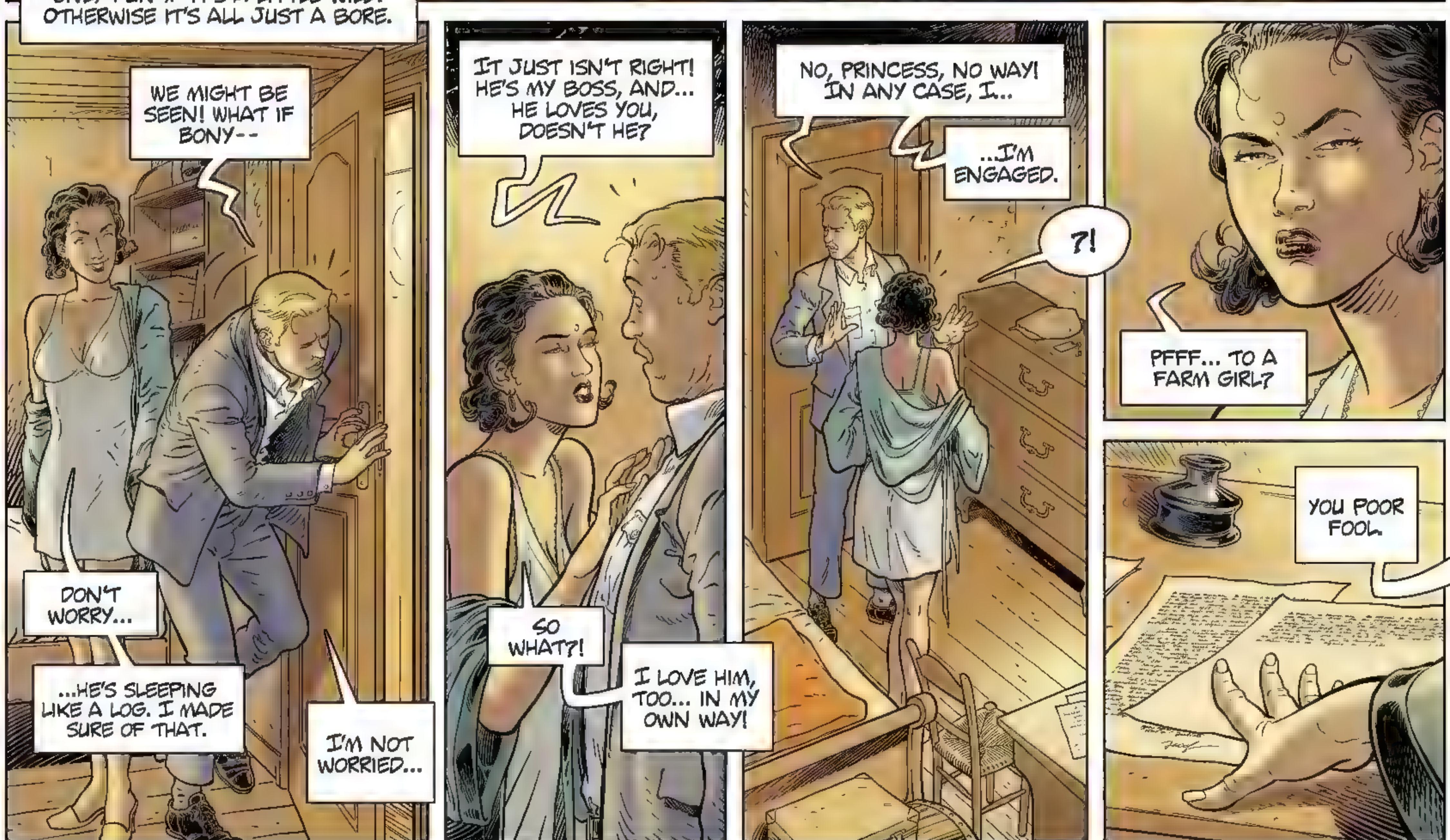
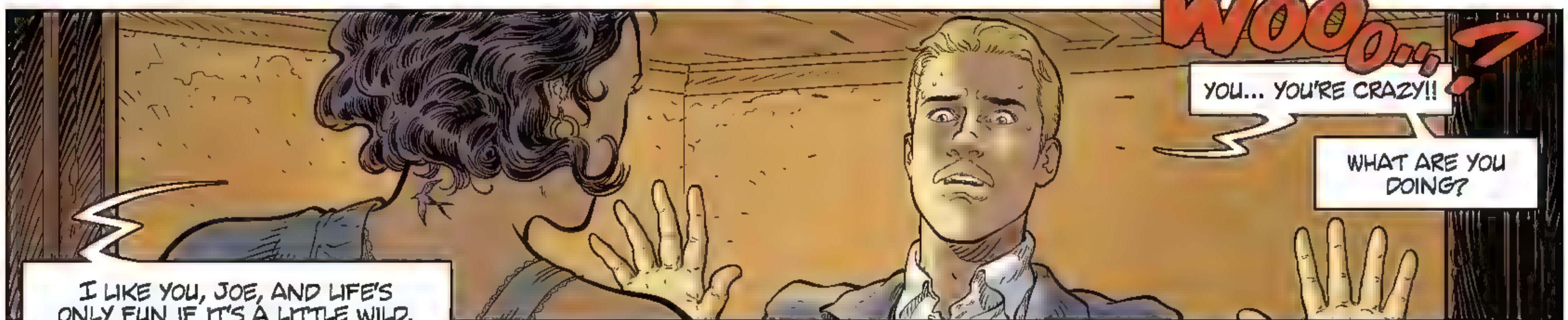
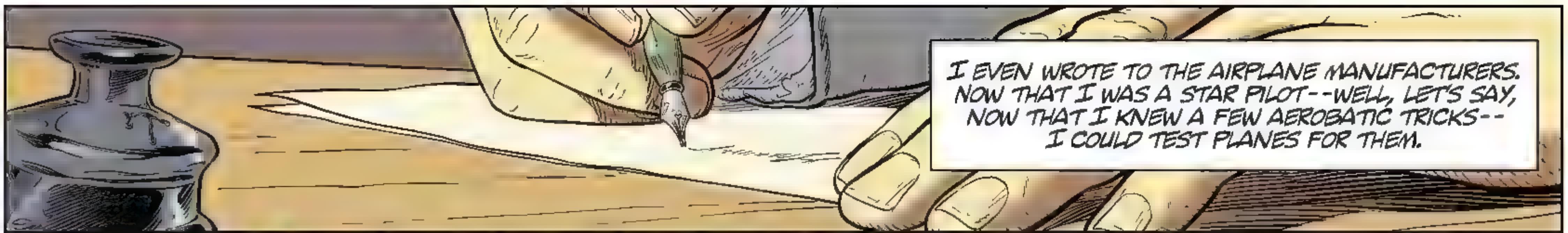


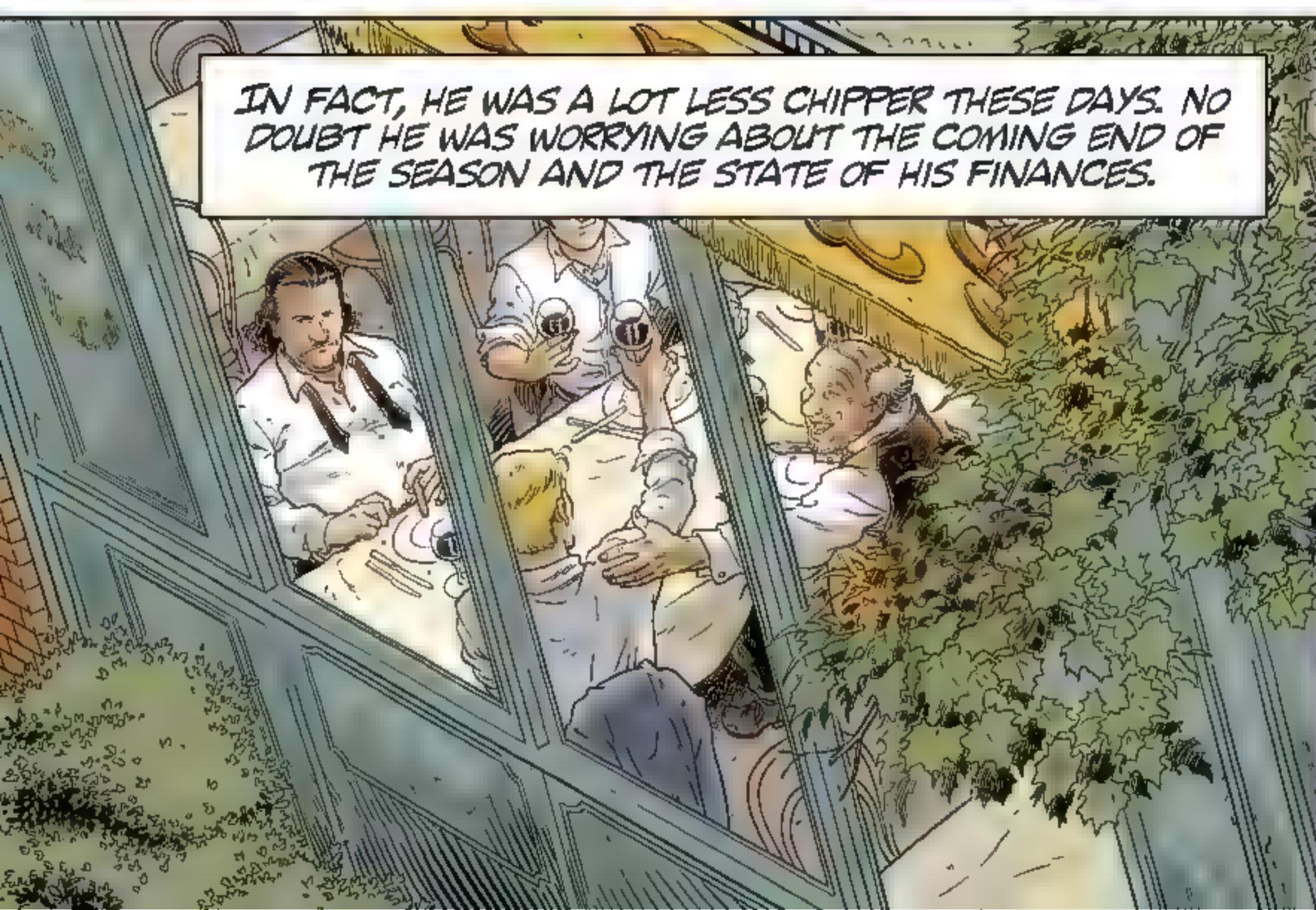
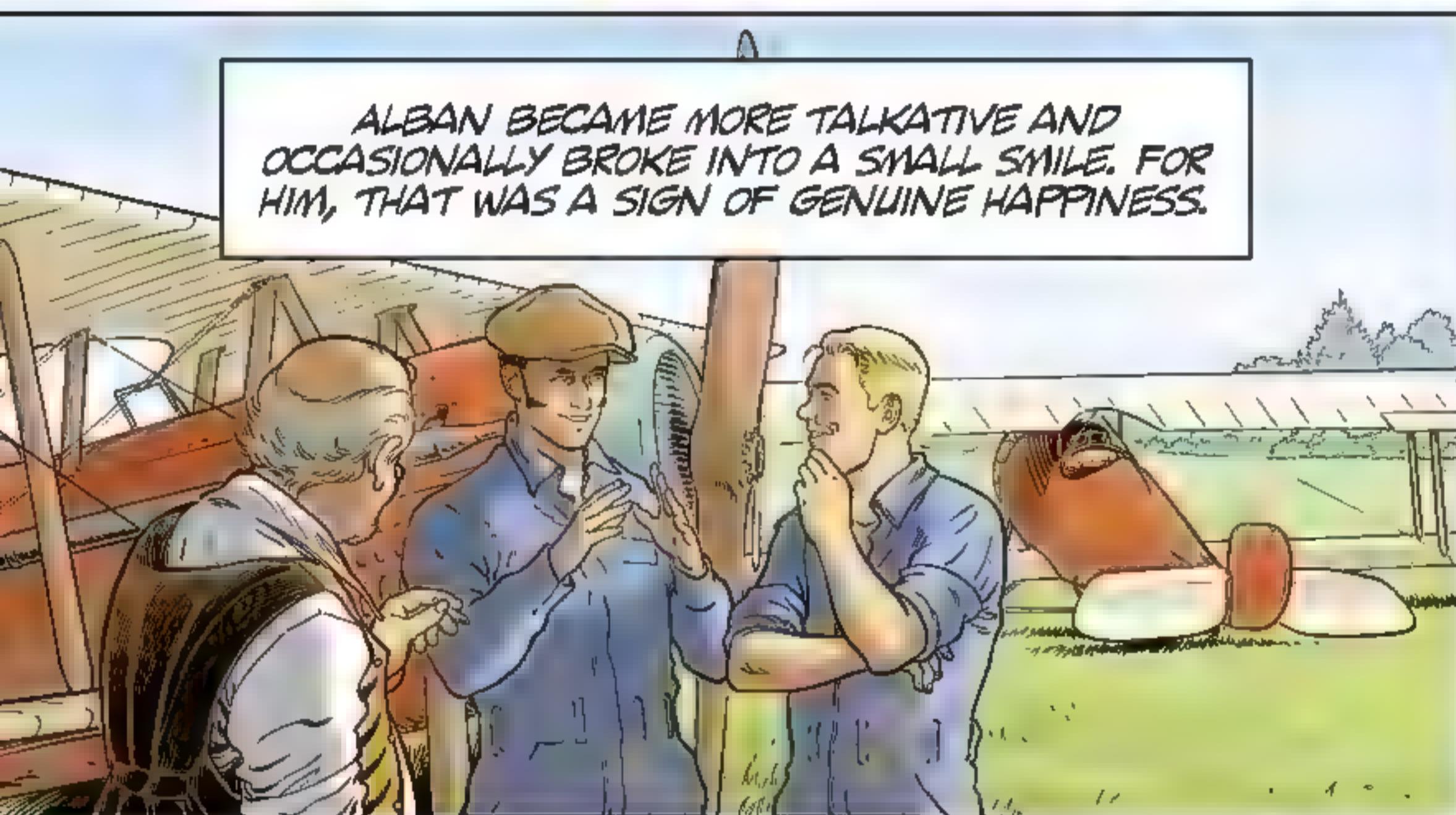
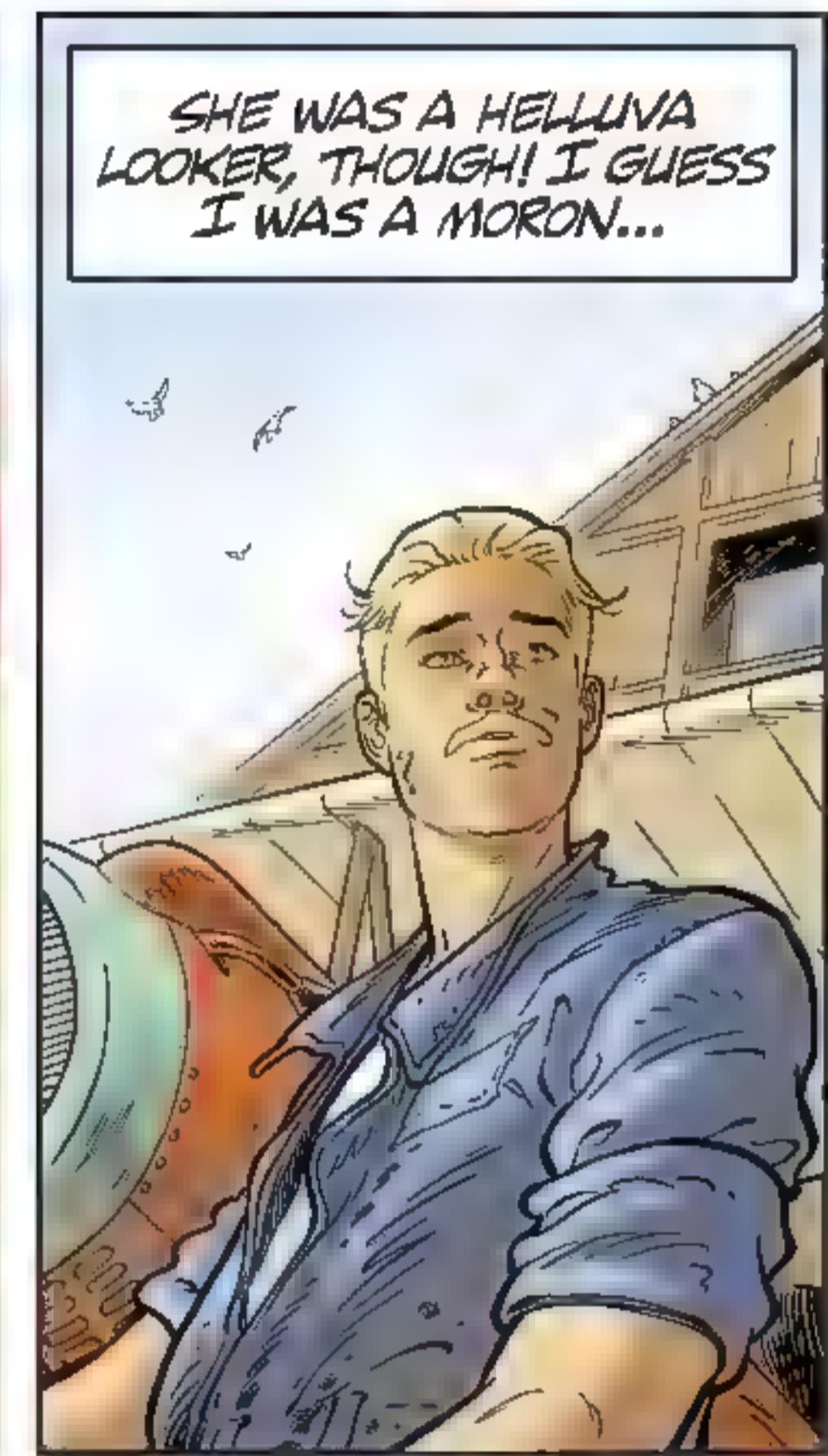
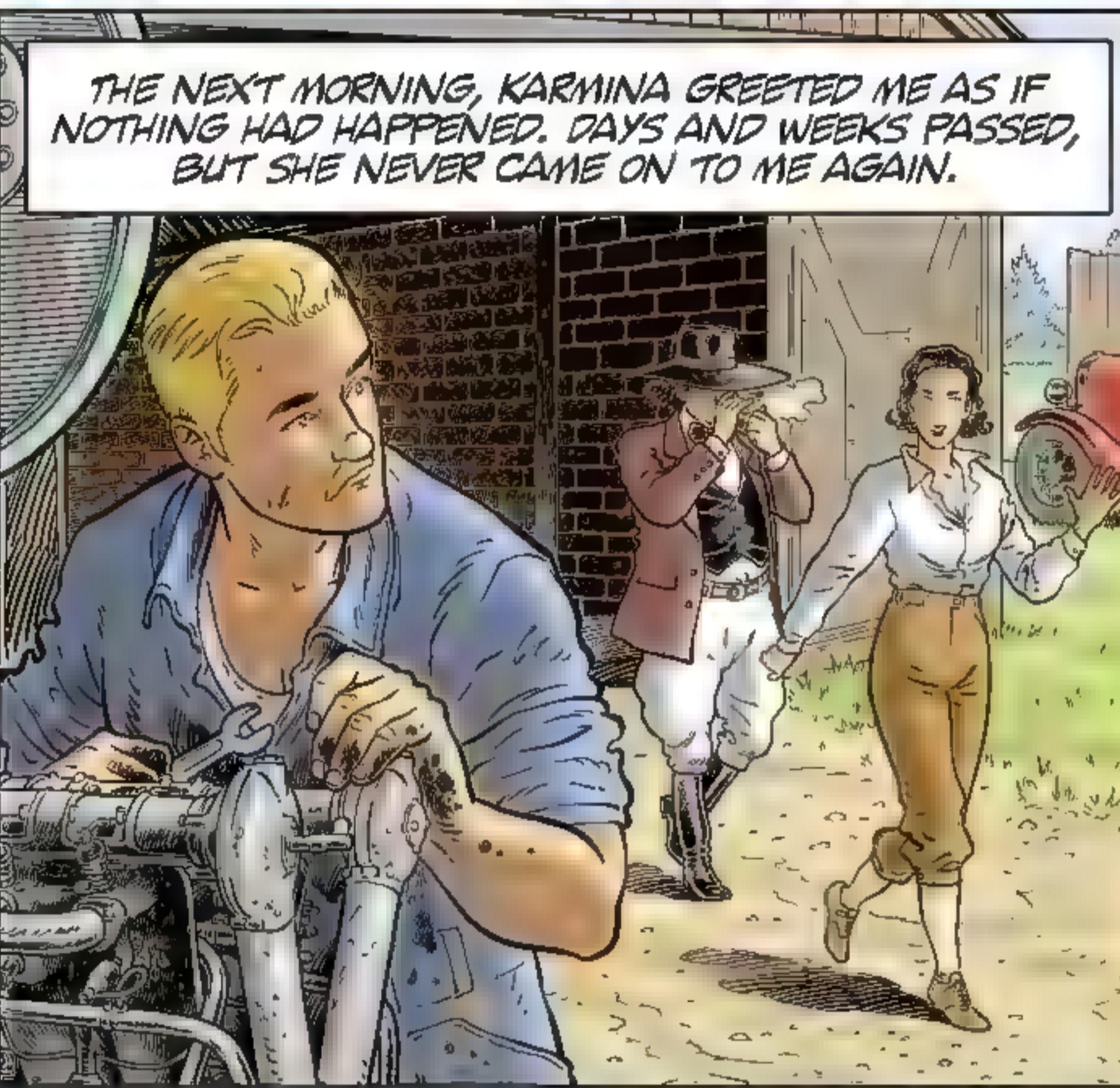
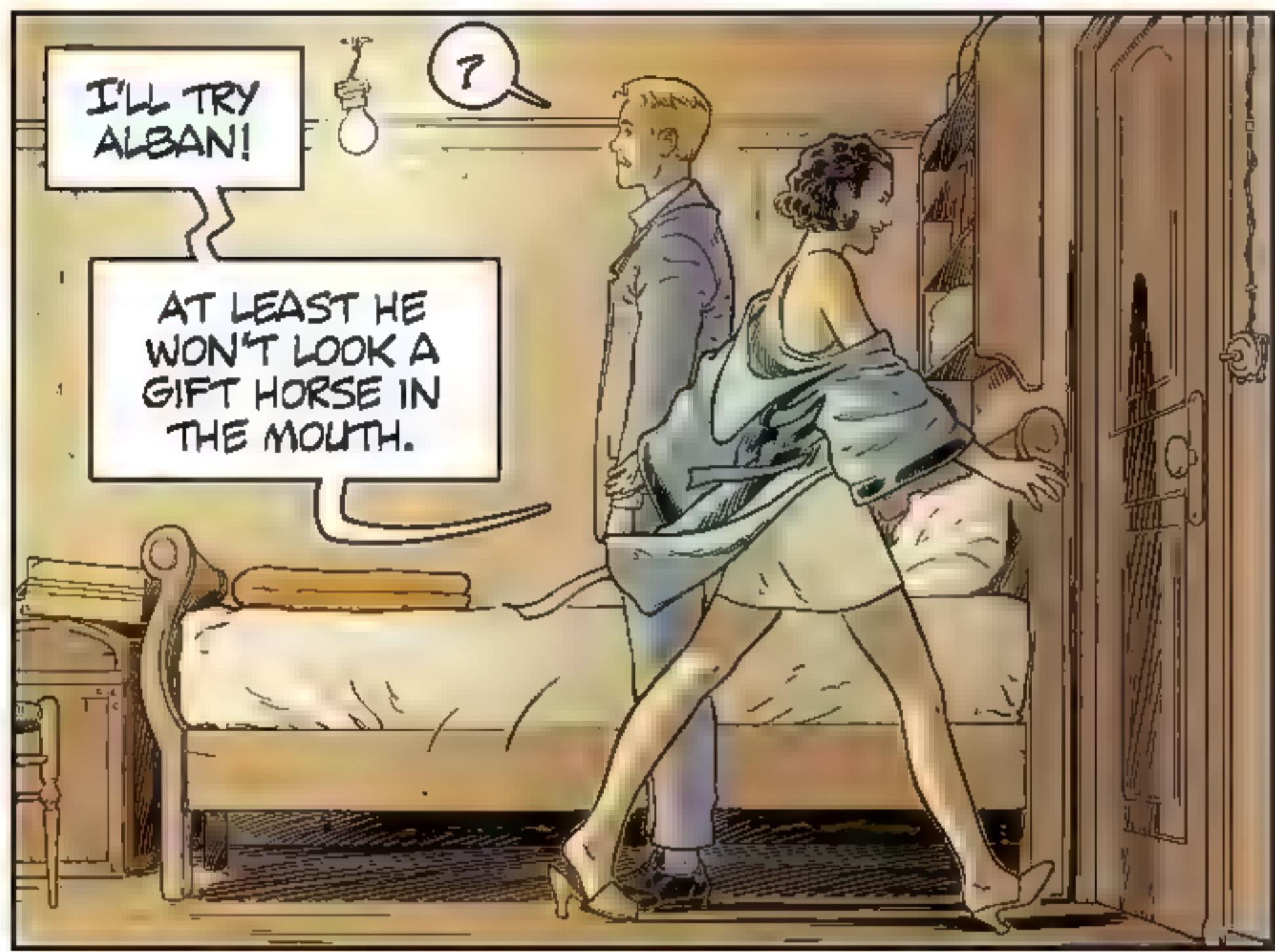
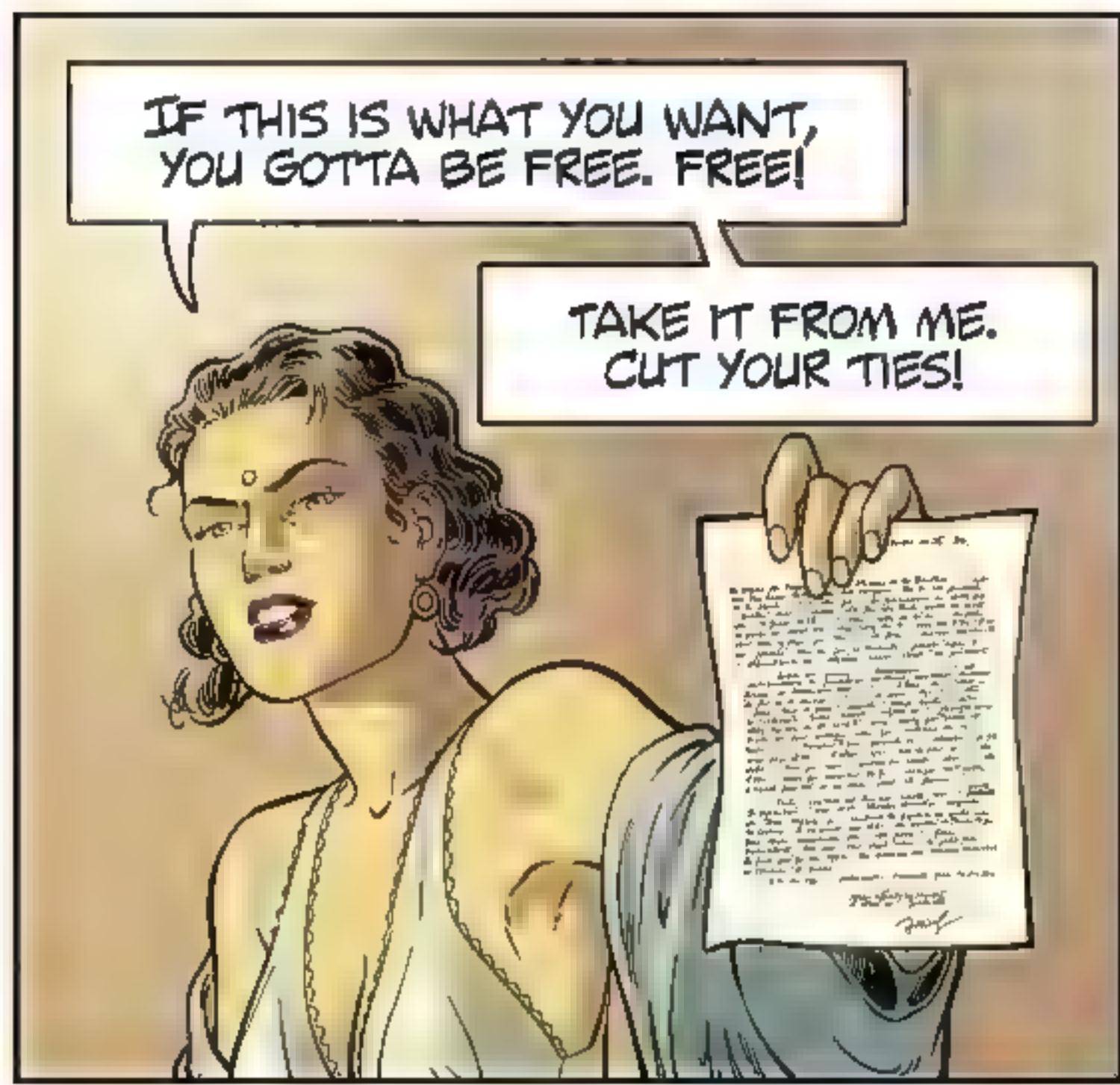
AS FOR ME, I WAS LEARNING A LOT FROM ALBAN, WHO WAS AN EXCELLENT PILOT AND, THOUGH A MAN OF FEW WORDS, A GOOD TEACHER. ABOVE ALL, I WAS CLOCKING UP FLYING TIME!

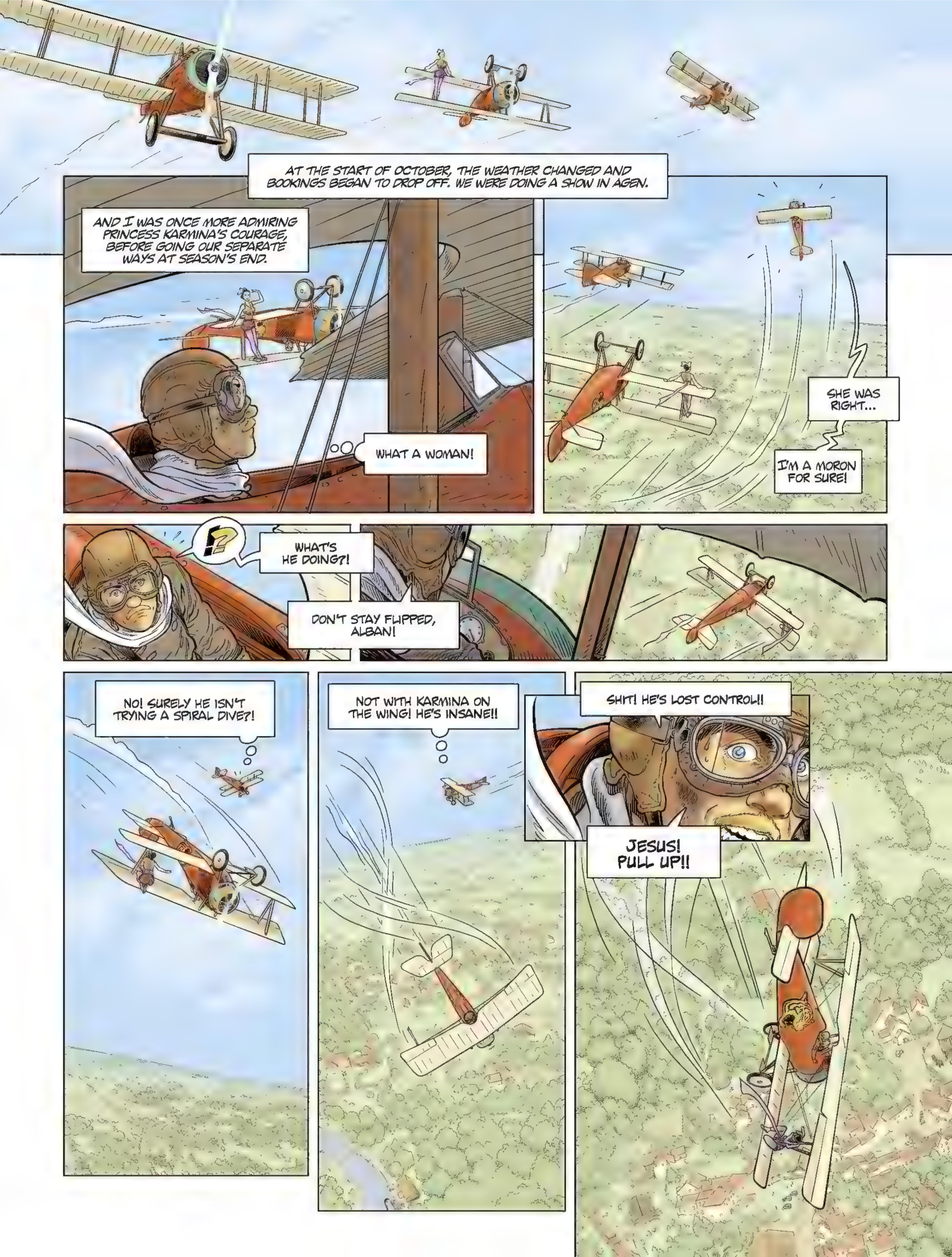


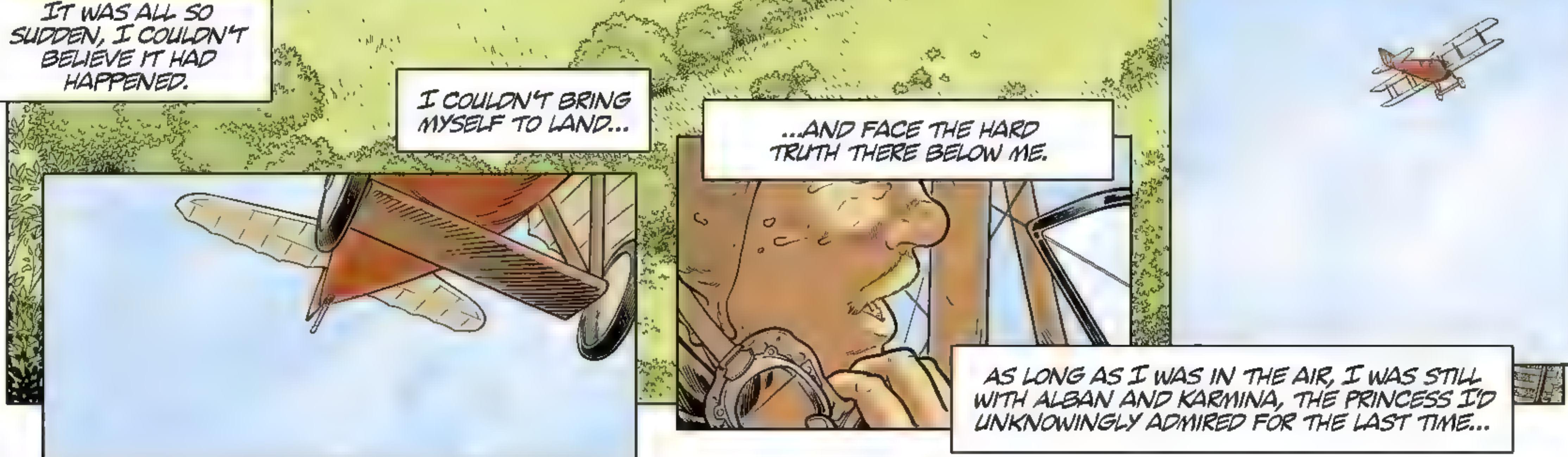
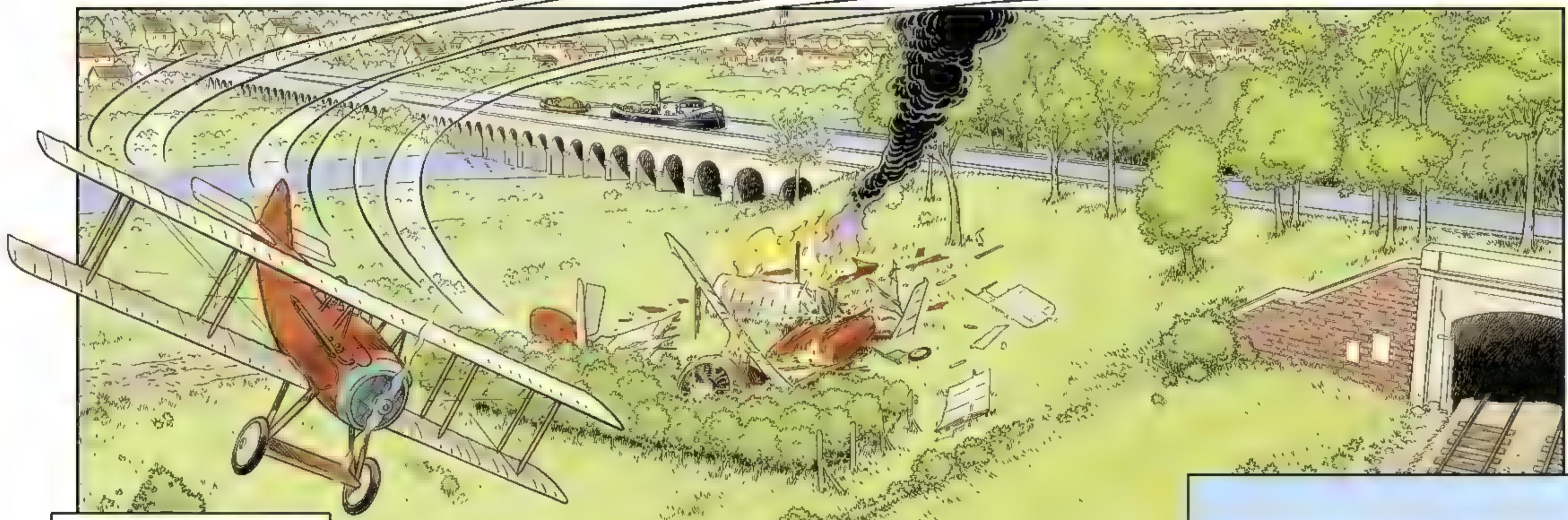
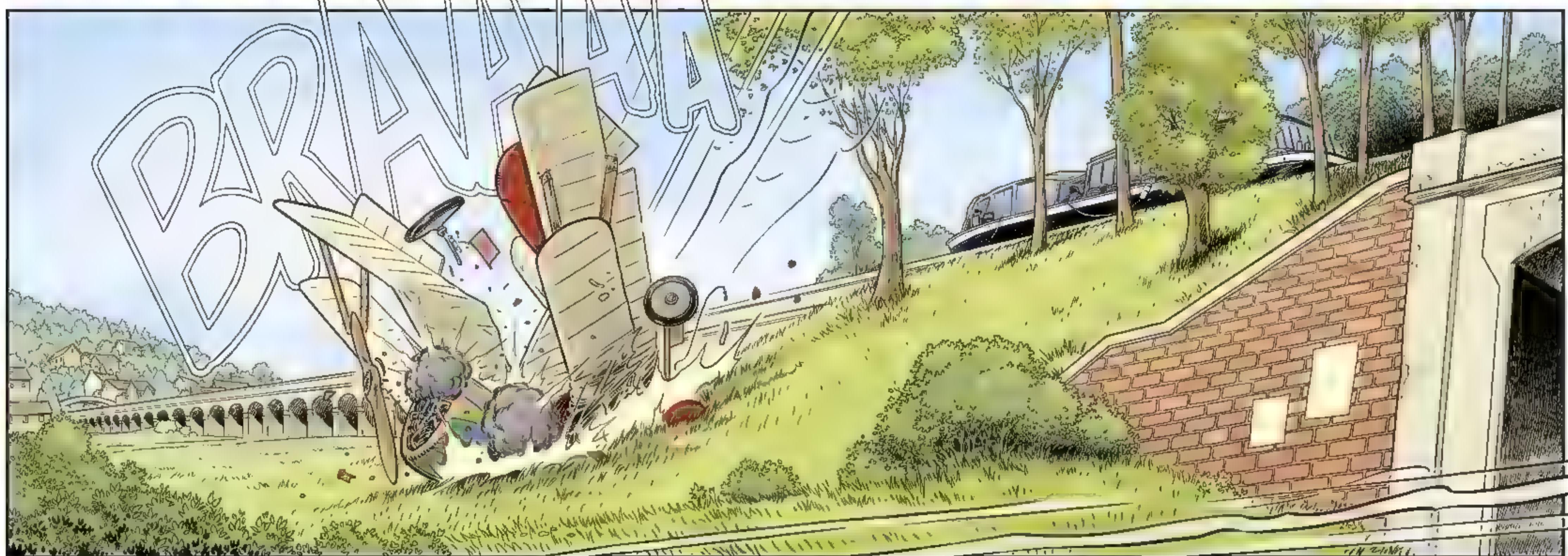
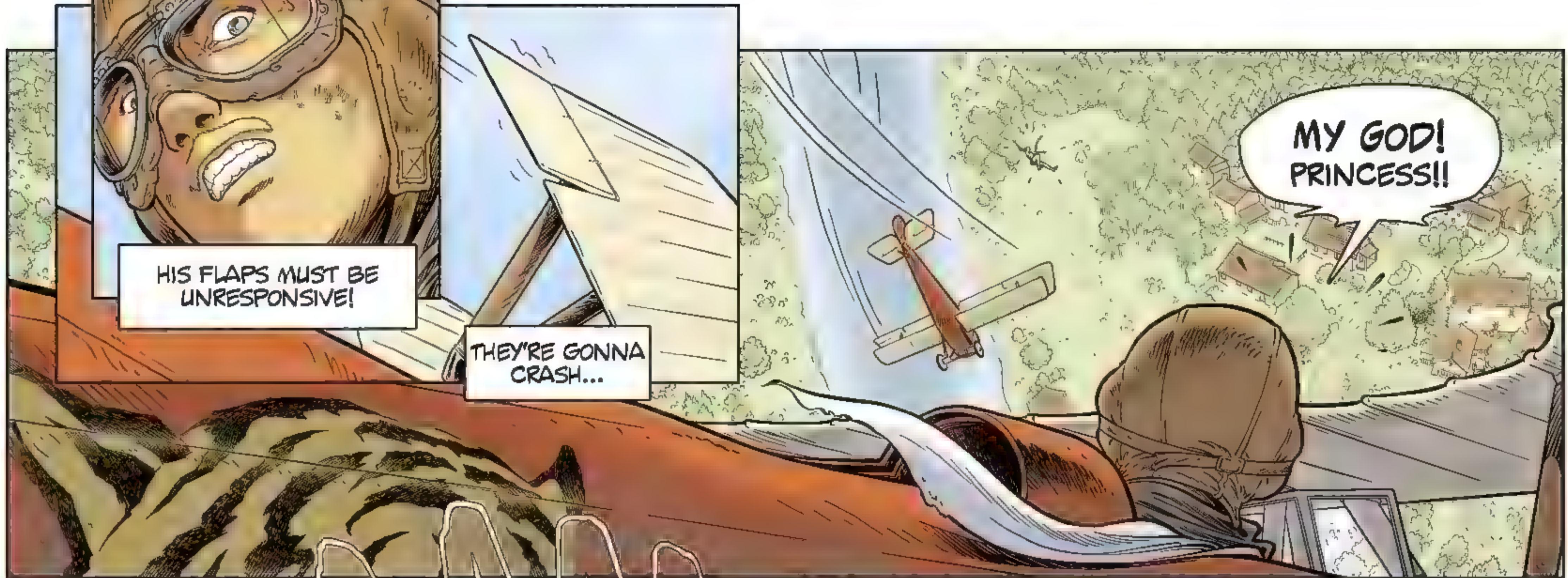
THAT MADE ME A BETTER PROSPECT FOR THE AIRLINES THAT I WAS STILL WRITING TO ALL THE TIME. NEW ROUTES WERE CONSTANTLY OPENING UP: TO LONDON, CENTRAL EUROPE, THE NEAR EAST, MOROCCO, ALGERIA...

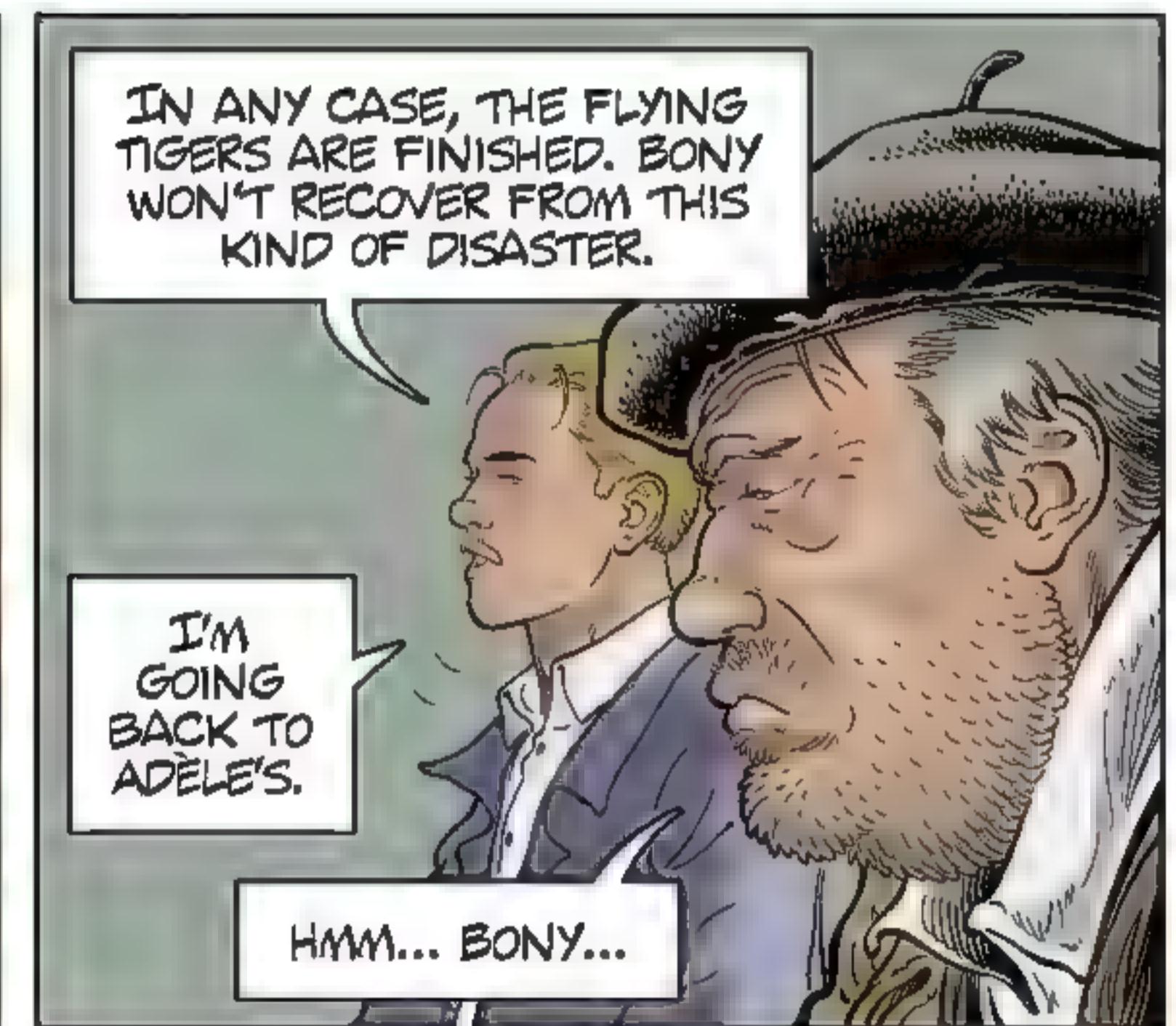
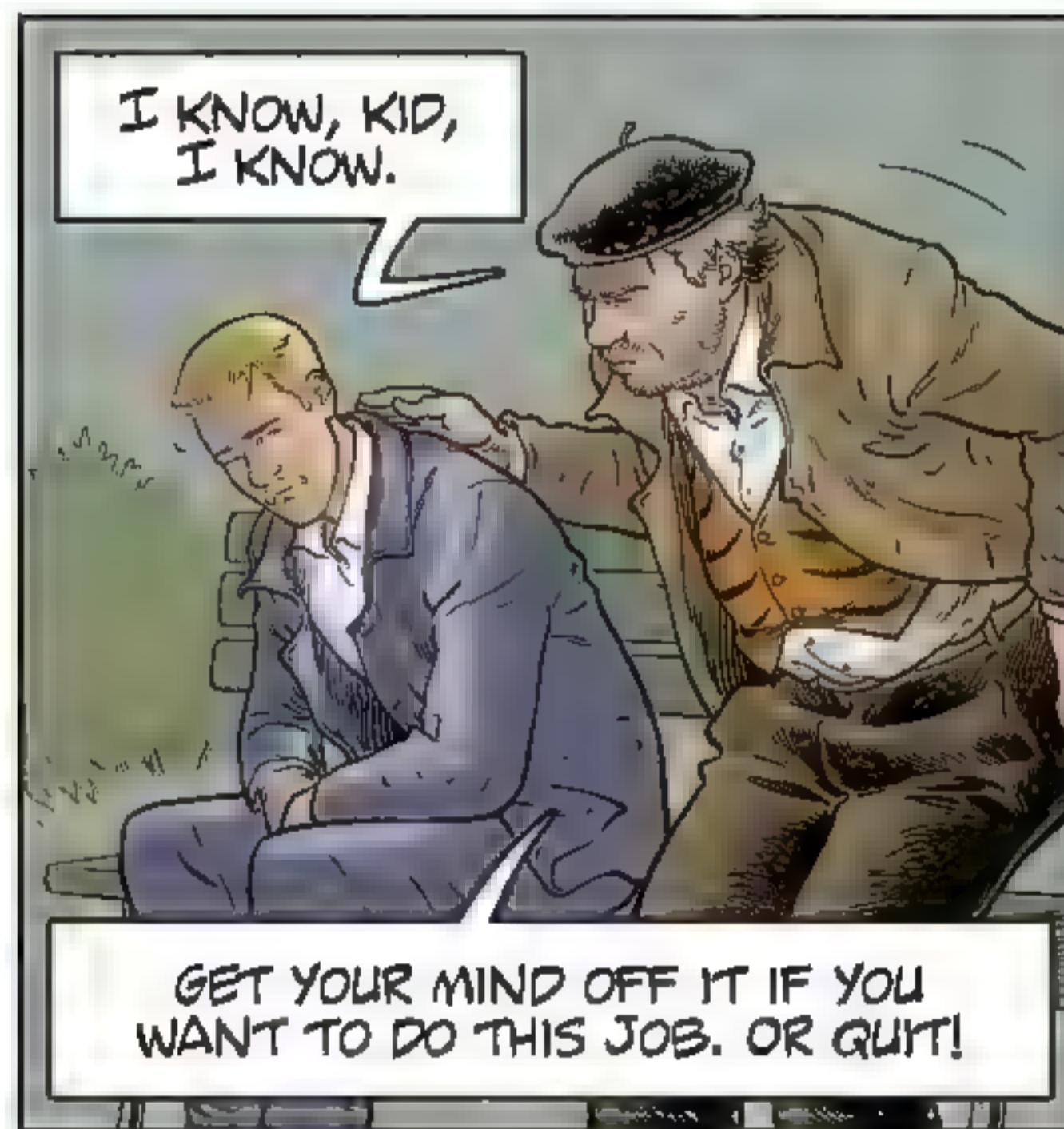
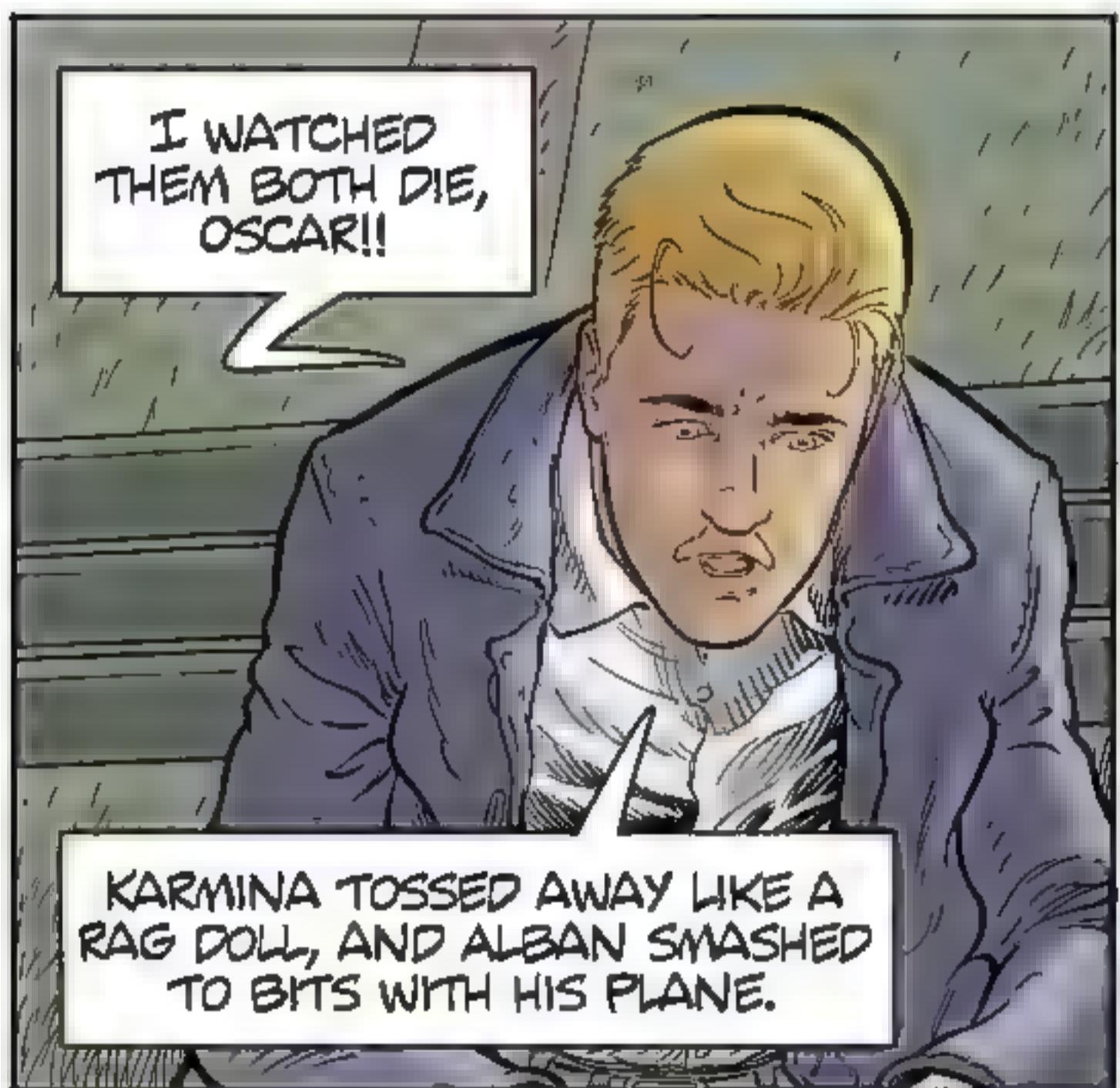
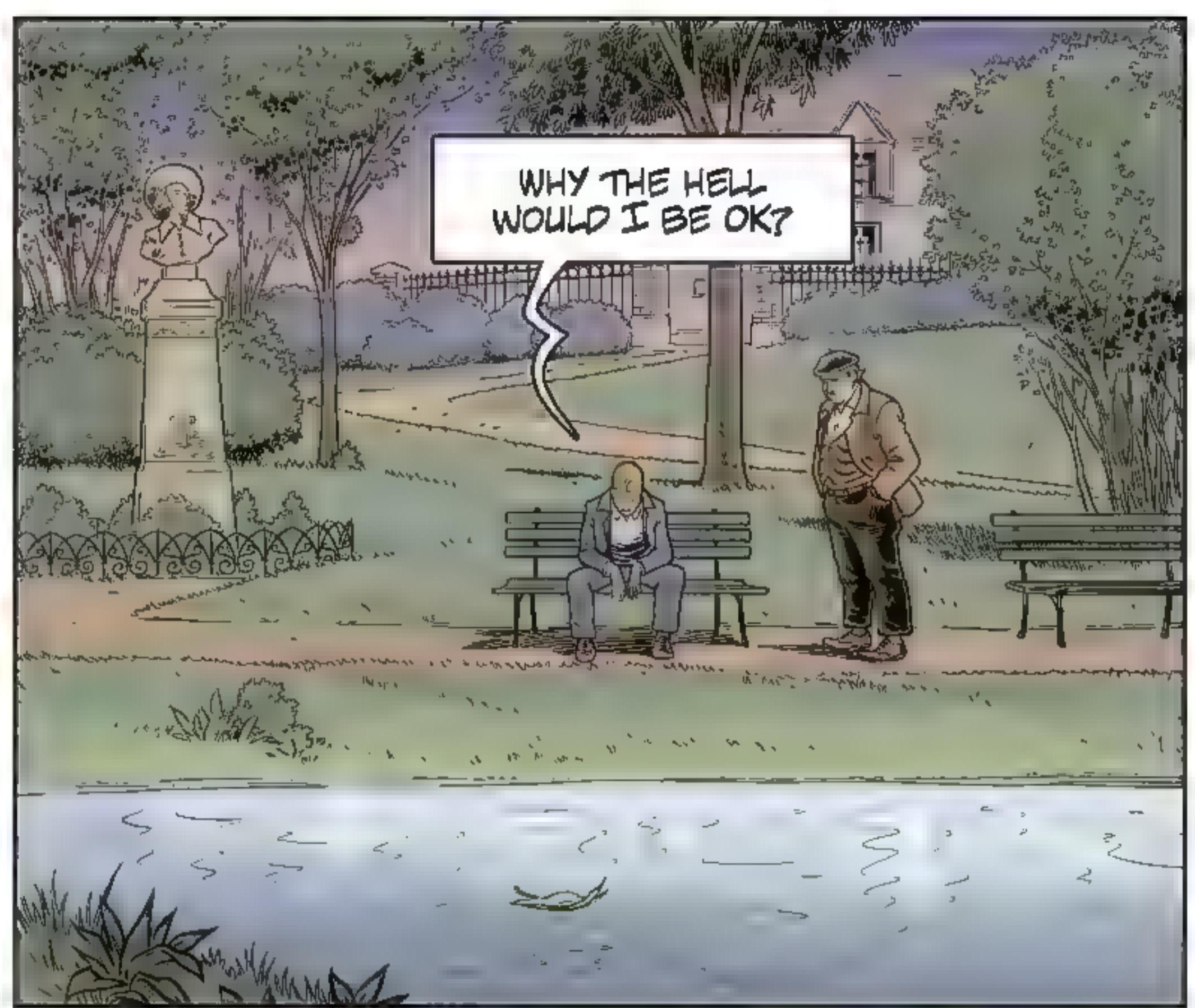
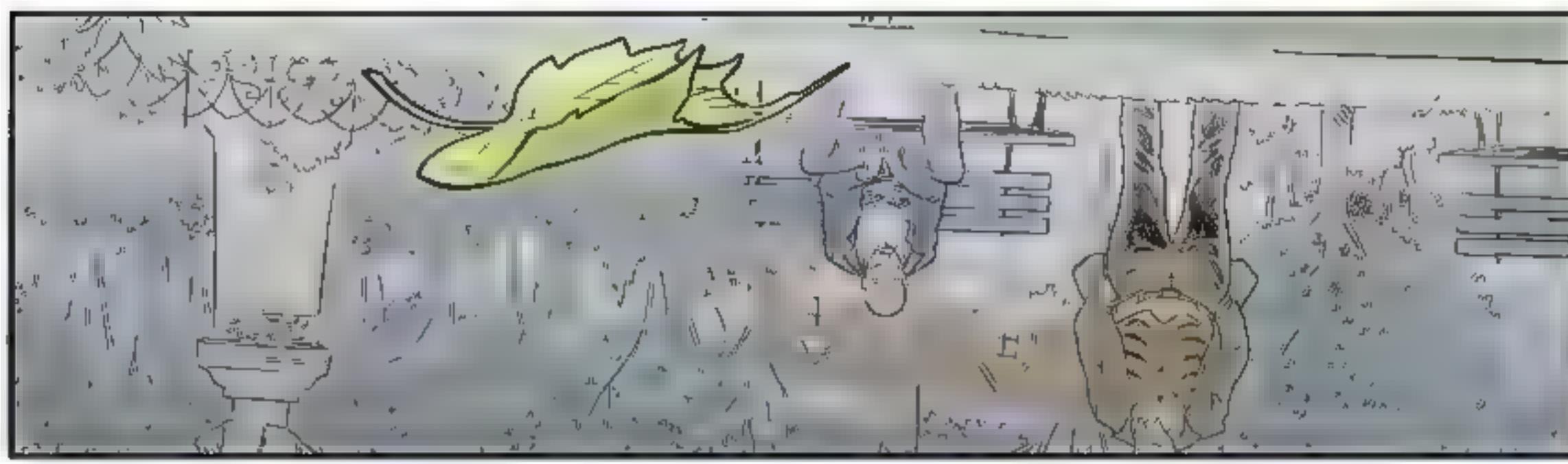












IN FACT, THREE OF THE FIVE STRANDS HAD BEEN CUT THROUGH.

ARE YOU SURE...?

YOU CALLING ME A LIAR, KID?

WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL THE COPS?

DID YOU SEE THE IDIOTS THEY SENT OVER? THEY DIDN'T WANT TO BE WORKING ON A SUNDAY! THEY WERE ALL TOO HAPPY TO REPORT IT AS AN ACCIDENT.

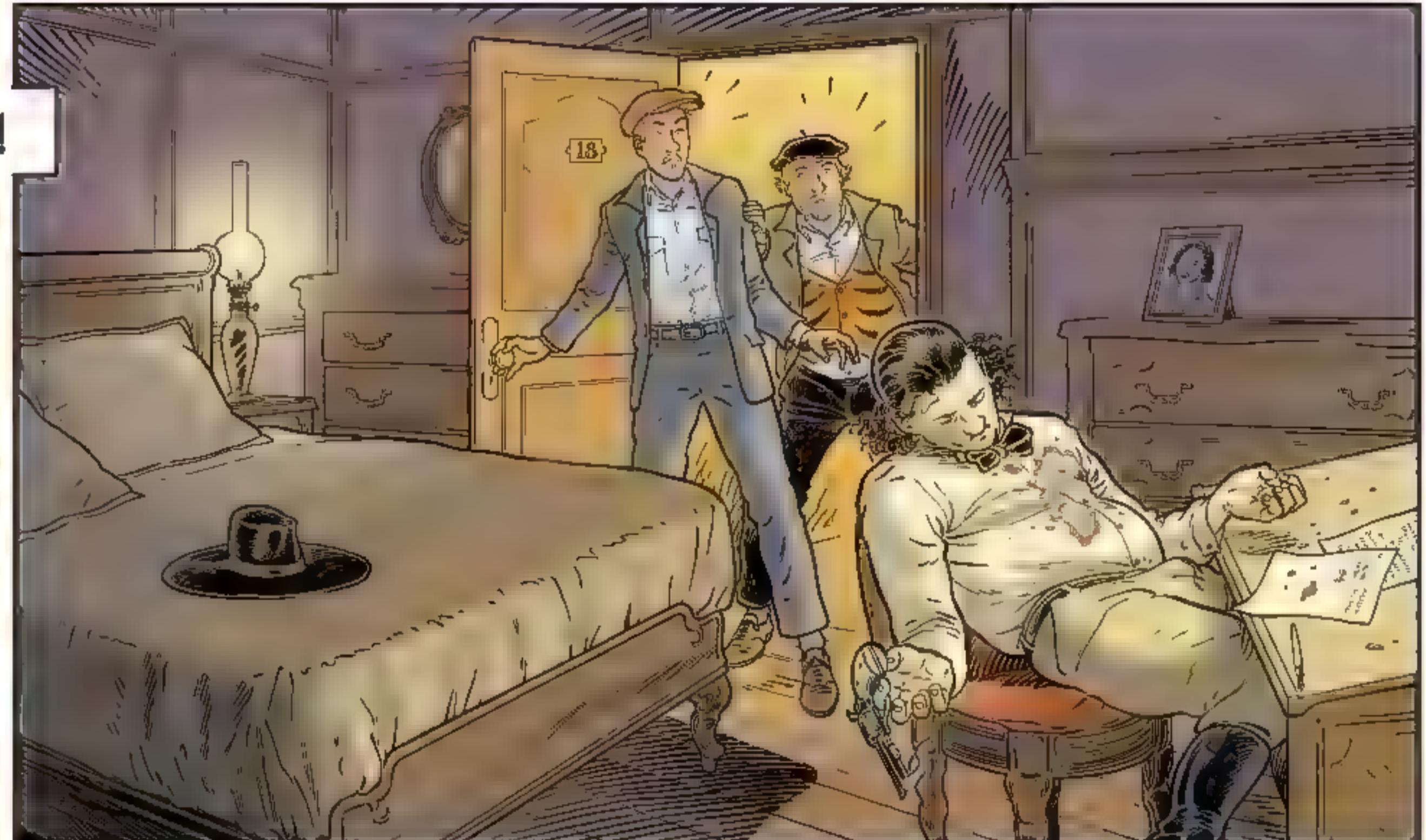
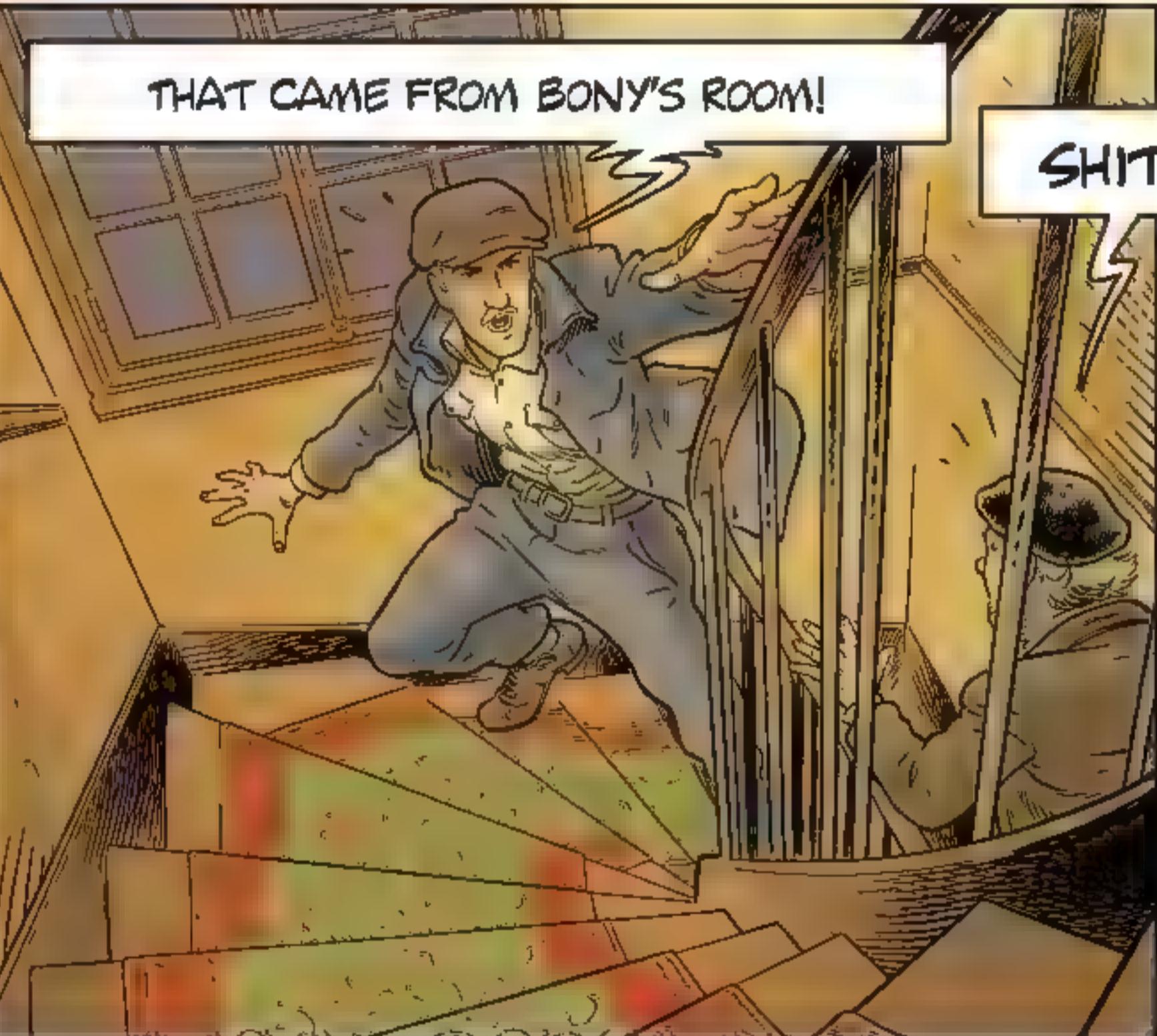
BUT I THINK I KNOW WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE.

YOU--

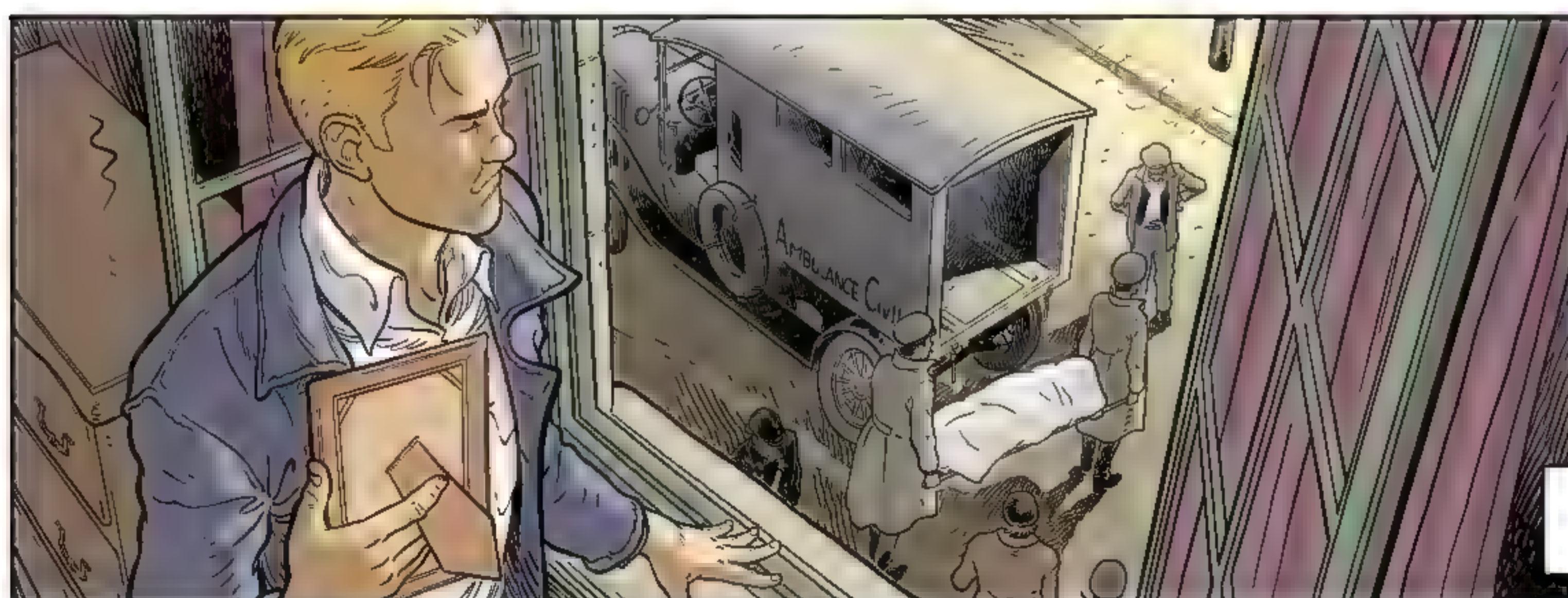
THAT CAME FROM BONY'S ROOM!

SHIT!

AND HOTEL D'AGEN



THE LETTER CONFIRMED EVERYTHING. THAT IT WAS BONY WHO'D SABOTAGED ALBAN'S PLANE. THAT HE'D FOUND OUT THAT KARMINA WAS SLEEPING WITH ALBAN. THAT HE MIGHT HAVE ACCEPTED IT IF SHE HADN'T TOLD HIM THAT SHE AND HER LOVER WERE LEAVING AT THE END OF THE SEASON.



THIS DOUBLE TRAGEDY HIT ME SO HARD THAT I SPENT THE WHOLE OF THE NEXT DAY DRIFTING AROUND IN A KIND OF BLACK FOG--A DEPRESSIVE STATE THAT I KNEW I NEEDED TO GET OUT OF FAST...

...ESPECIALLY AT AN AGE WHEN MY FUTURE SHOULD'VE BEEN DRIVEN BY HOPES AND DREAMS.

TOULOUSE IS ONLY FIFTY MILES FROM HERE, JOE!

WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME THAT?

BECAUSE THE LATÉCOÈRE AIRMAIL SERVICE IS BASED THERE. (1)

I KNOW THAT. I WROTE TO THEM, BUT THEY NEVER BOthered TO REPLY.

IT WAS OSCAR WHO GOT ME BACK ON THE ROAD TO BECOMING A PILOT.

WELL, KID, I'M GONNA GO SEE THEM WITHOUT WRITING FIRST! THEY NEED MECHANICS FOR THEIR STATIONS IN AFRICA.

FORTUNE'S A FLIGHTY DAME, KID, AND SOMETIMES YOU'VE GOT TO TWIST HER ARM!

I'VE PACKED YOU A BAG. WE'LL SLEEP HERE AND LEAVE AT DAYBREAK. WITH THE SPAD, WE'LL BE THERE BY THE TIME THEY OPEN.

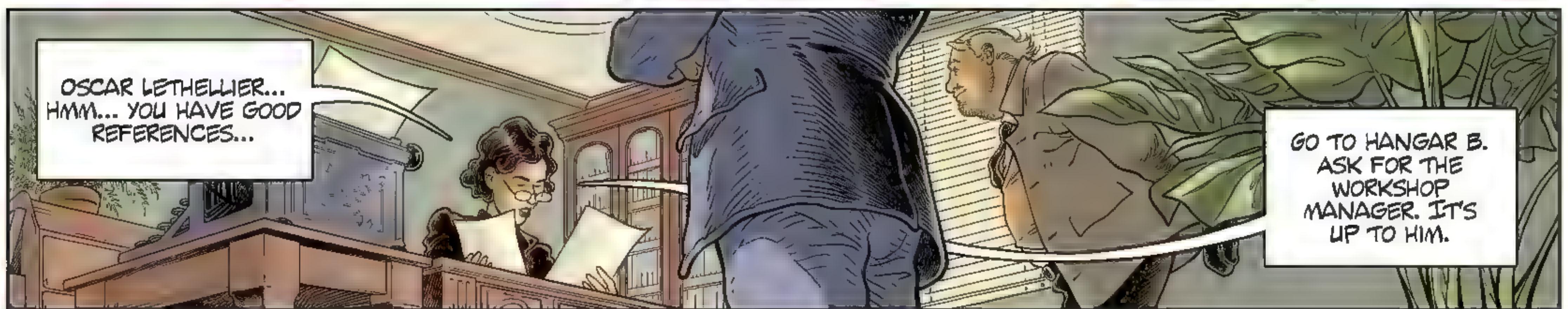
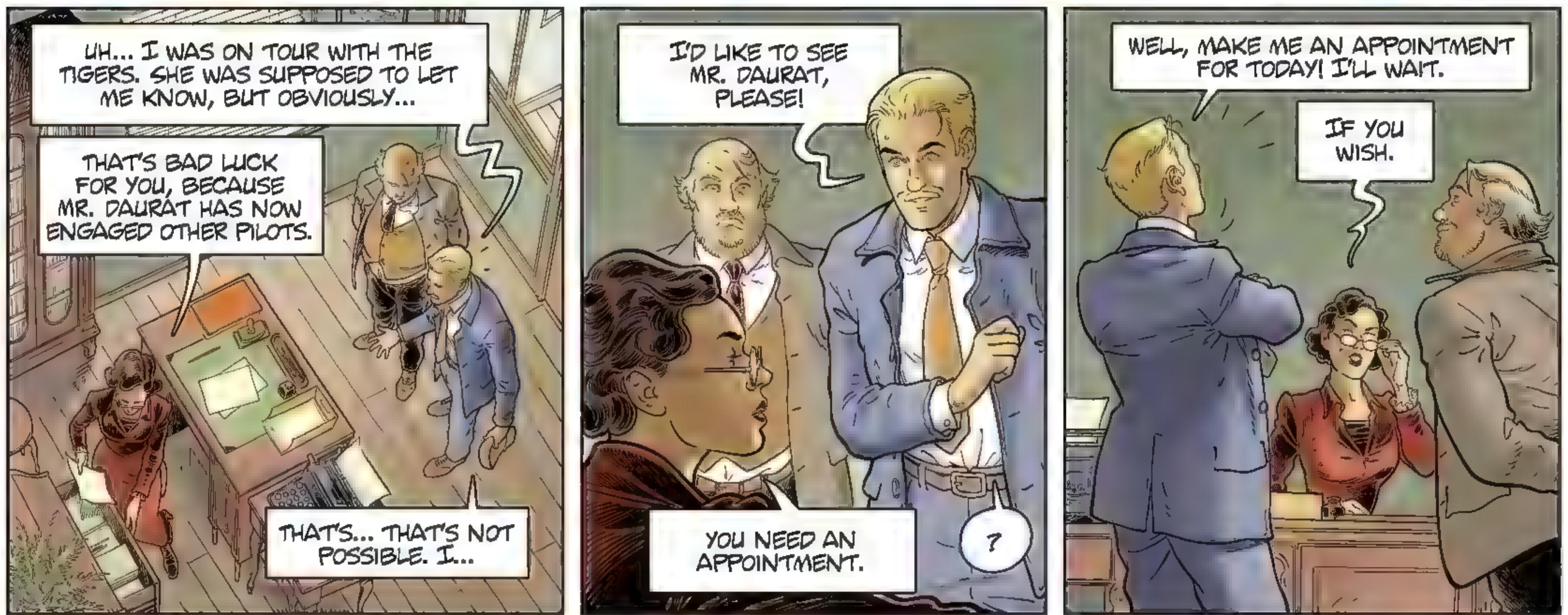
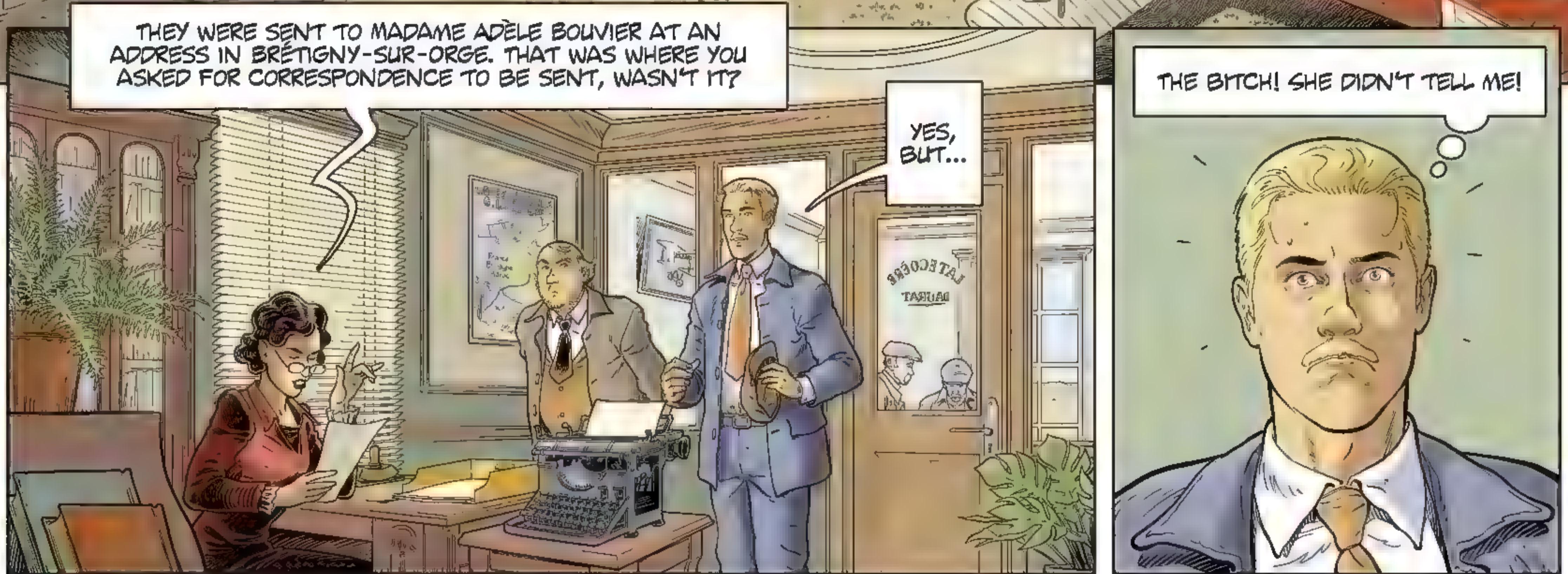
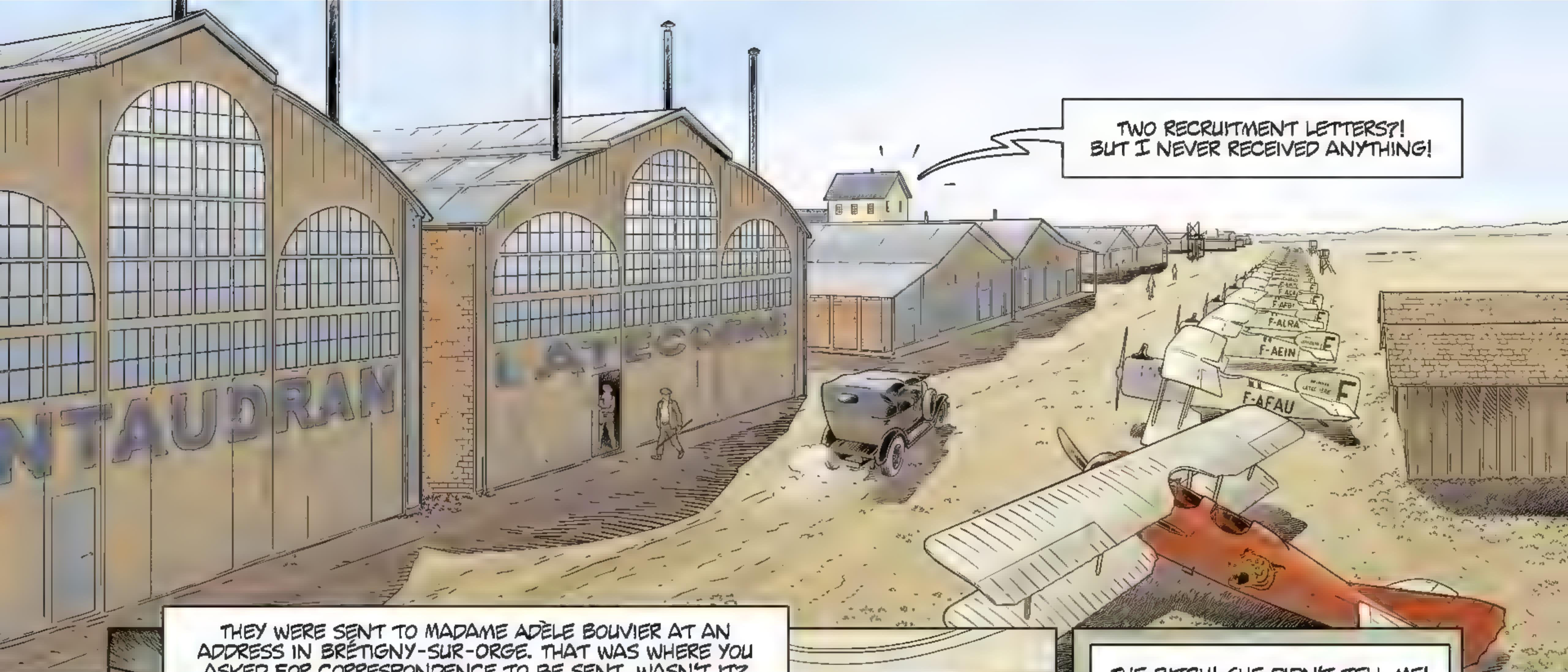
BUT...

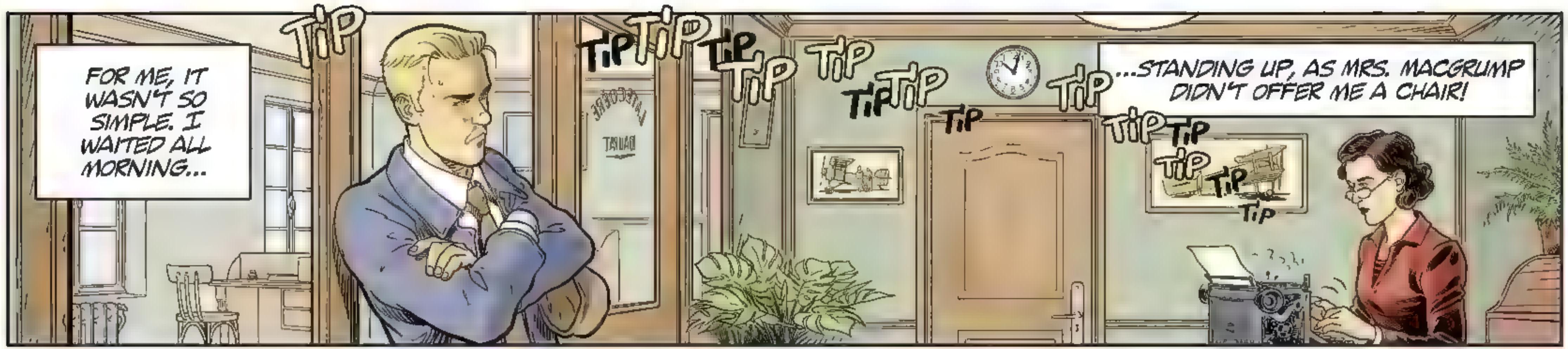
...IT BELONGS TO BONY!

YOU THINK HE'LL REPORT US?

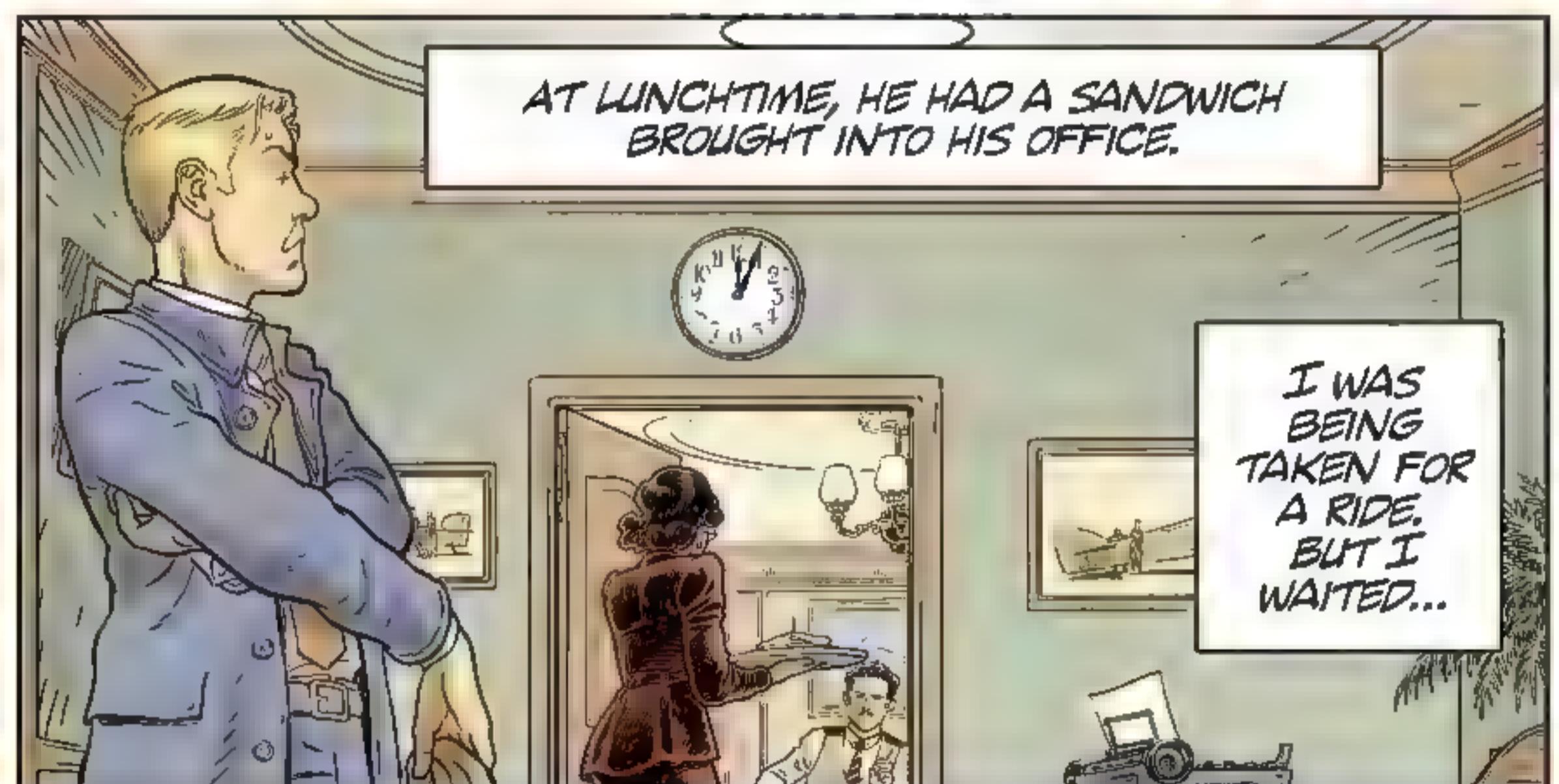
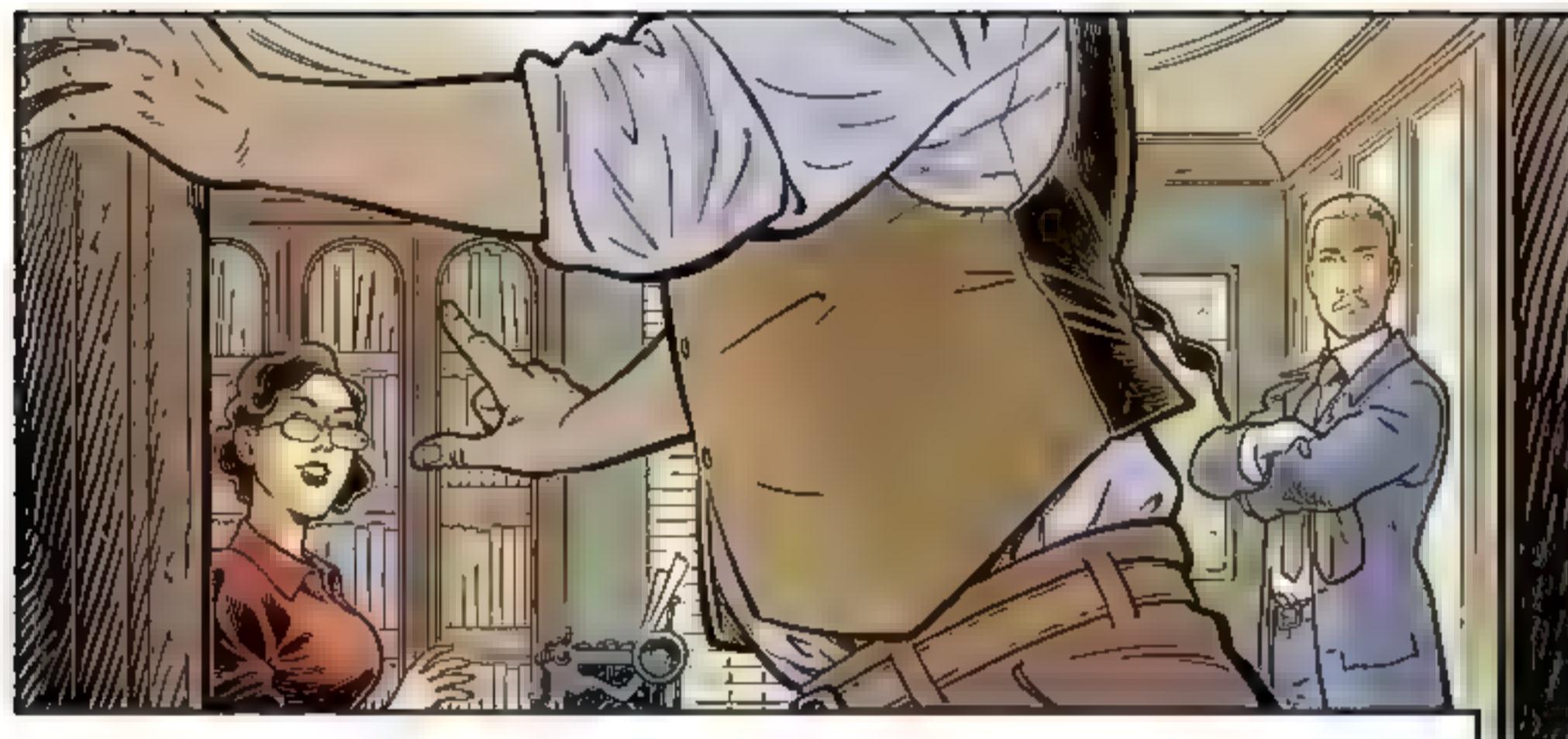
UNTIL THEY WORK OUT WHO'S GONNA INHERIT THE FLYING TIGERS, IT BELONGS TO US!

(1) AT NEARBY MONTAUDRAN.

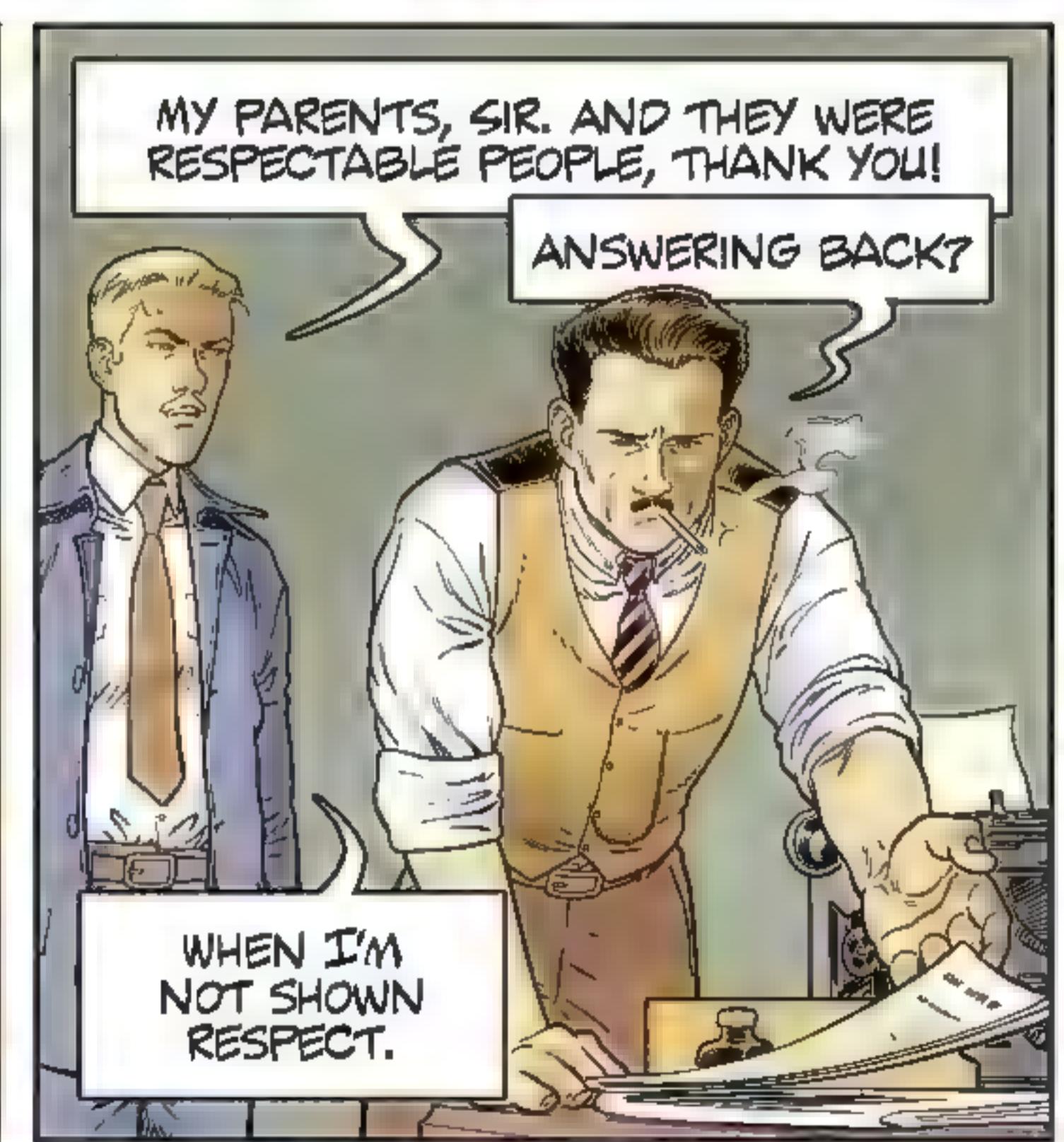
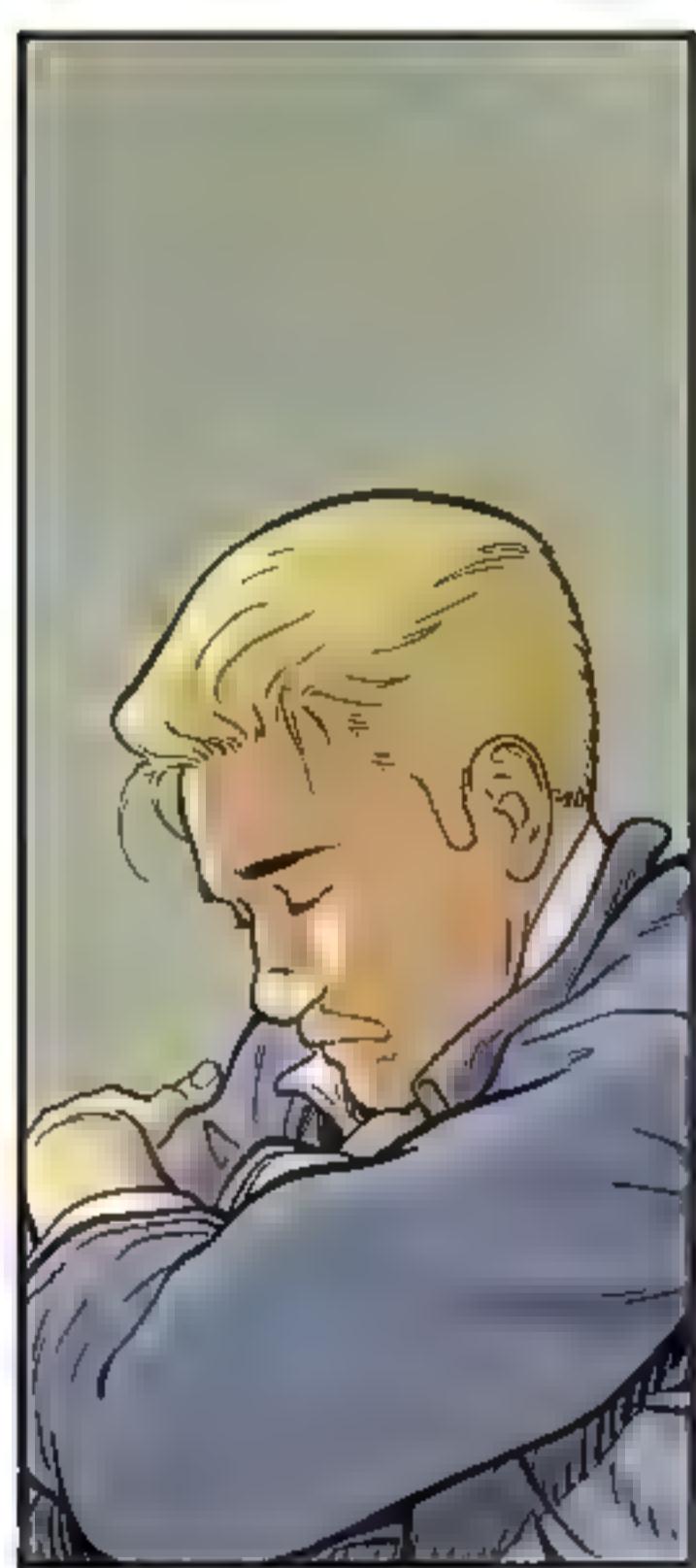
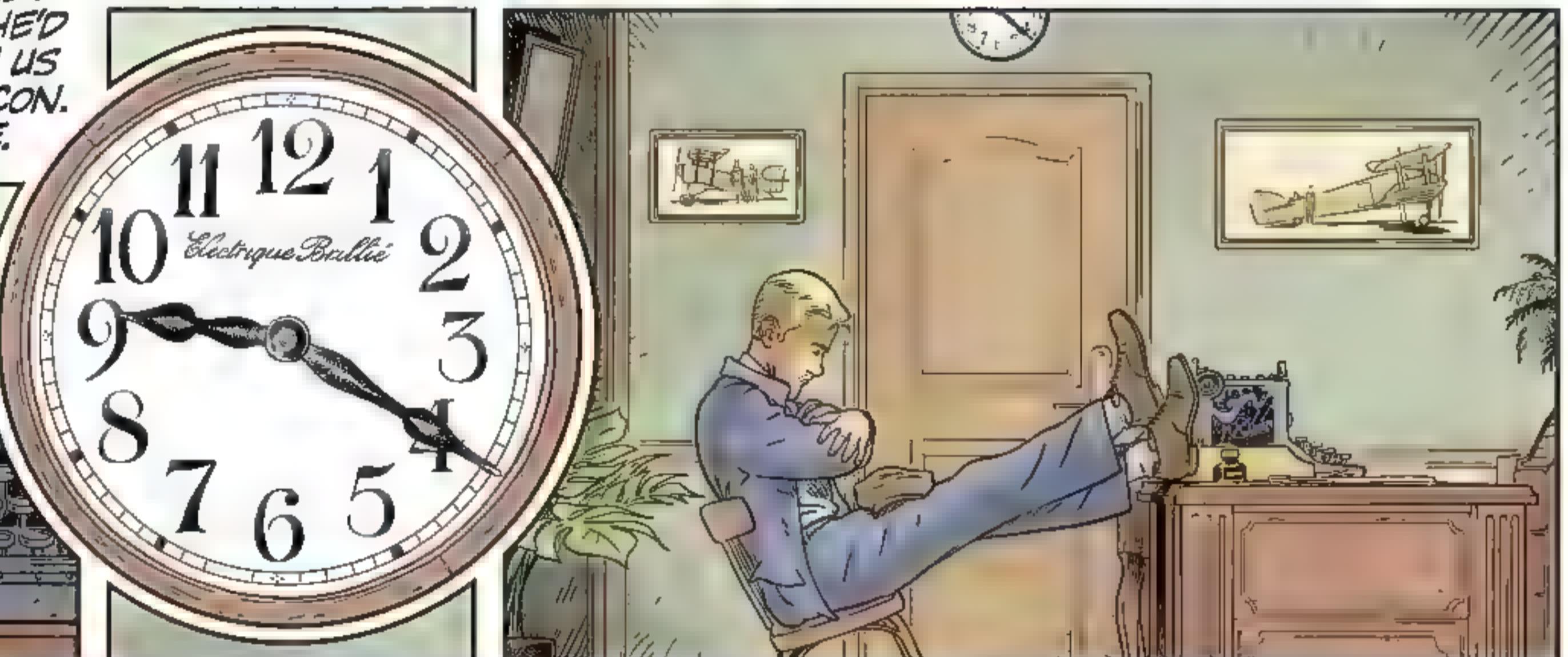


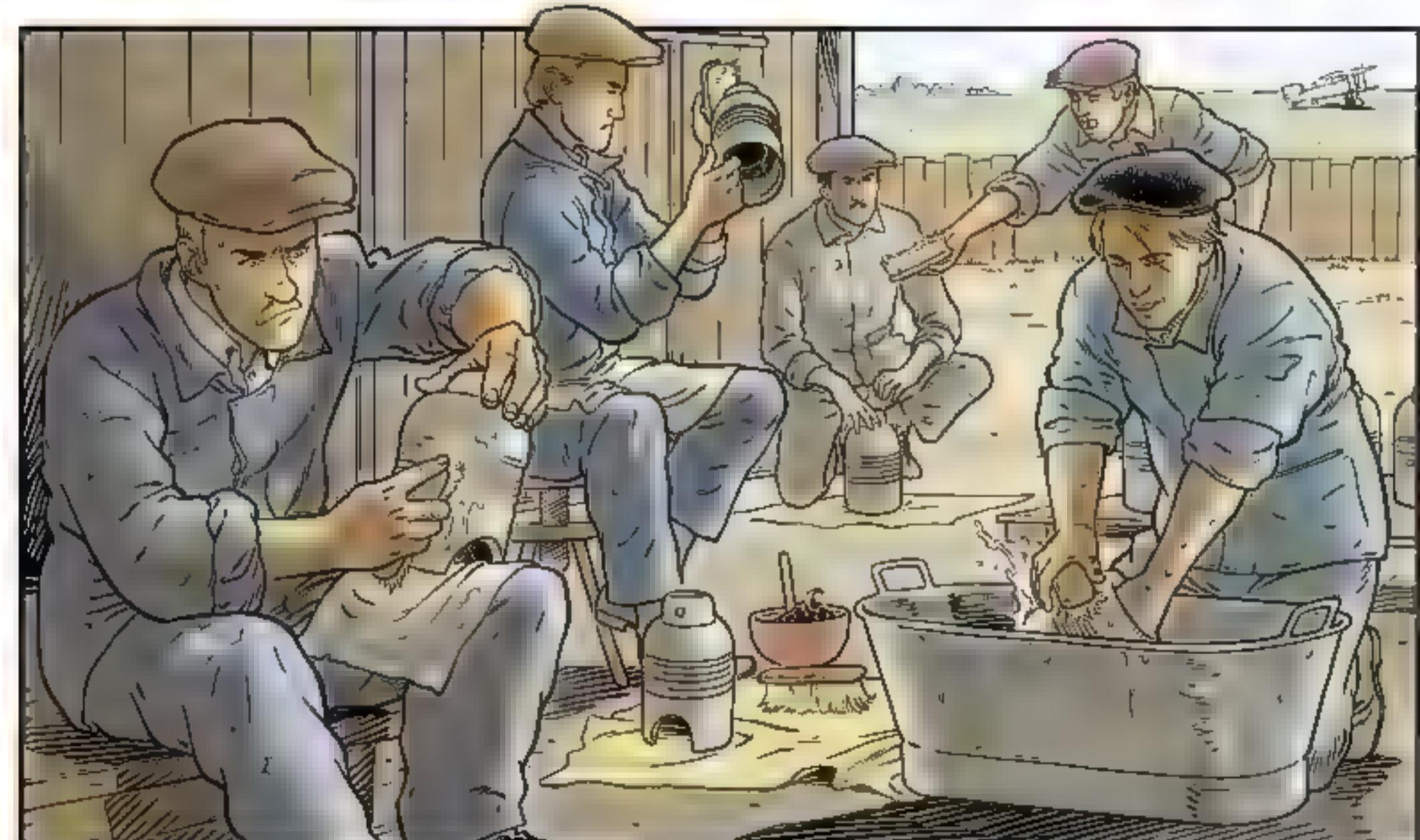
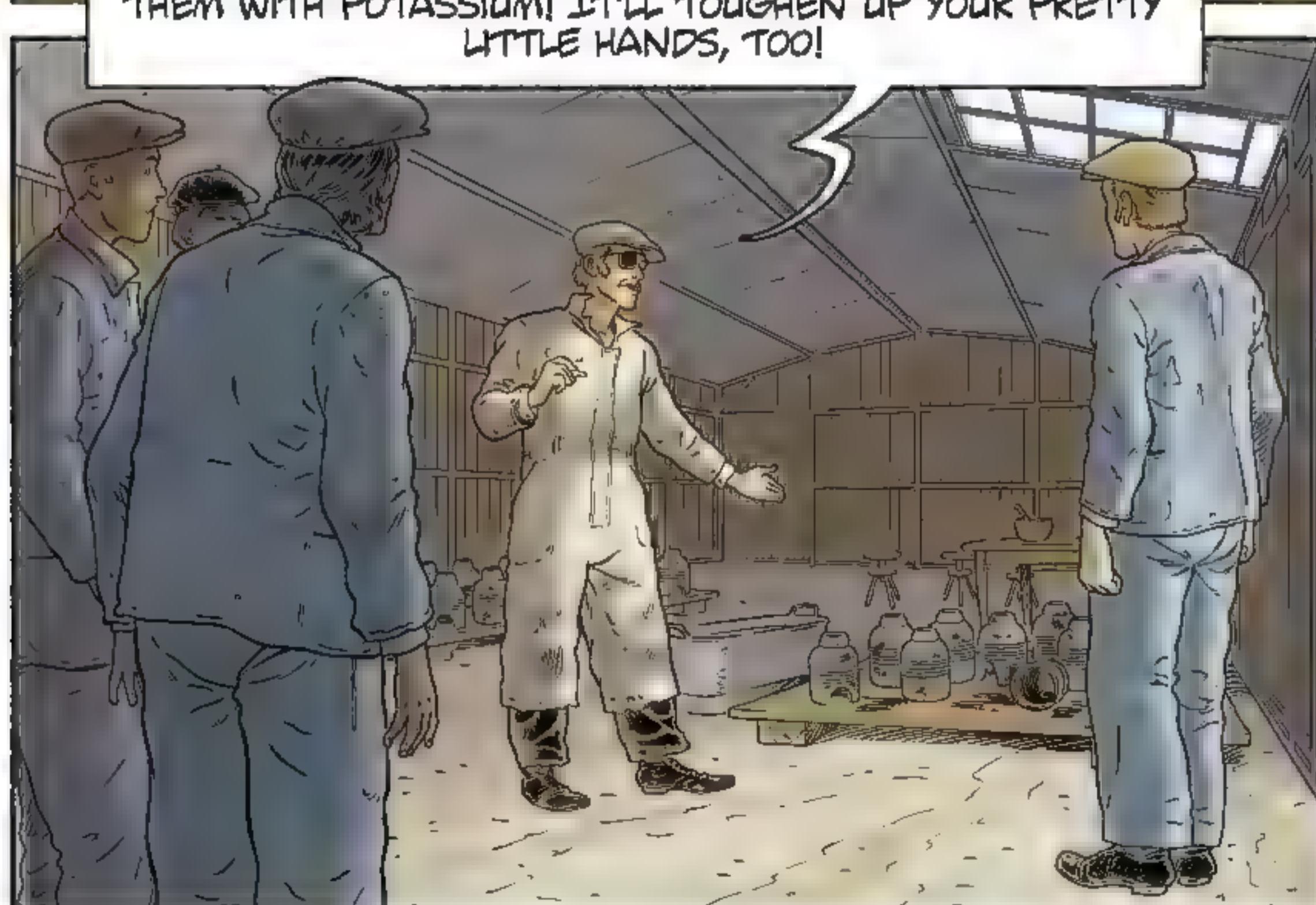
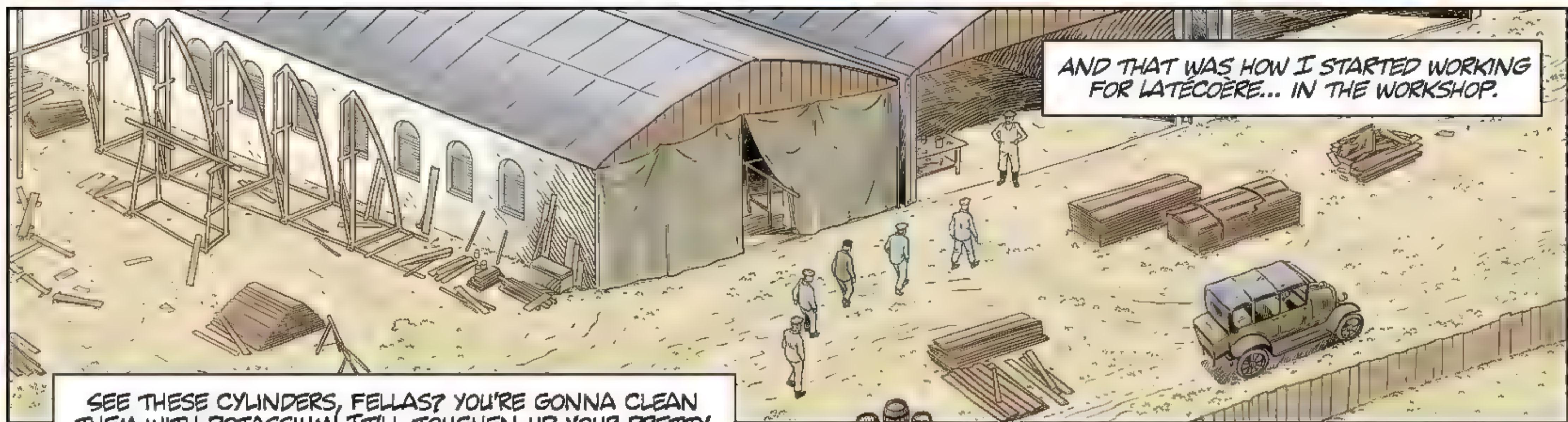
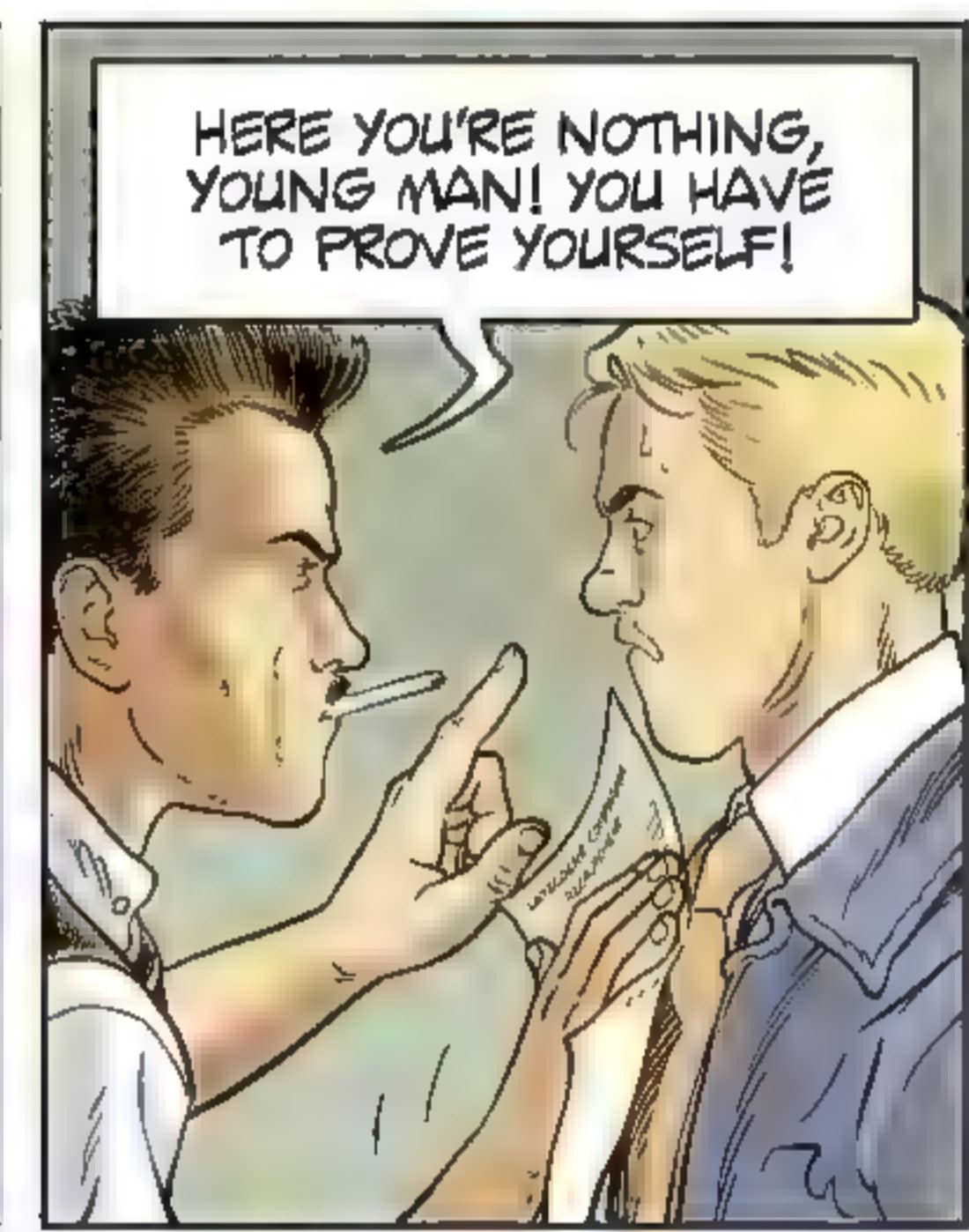
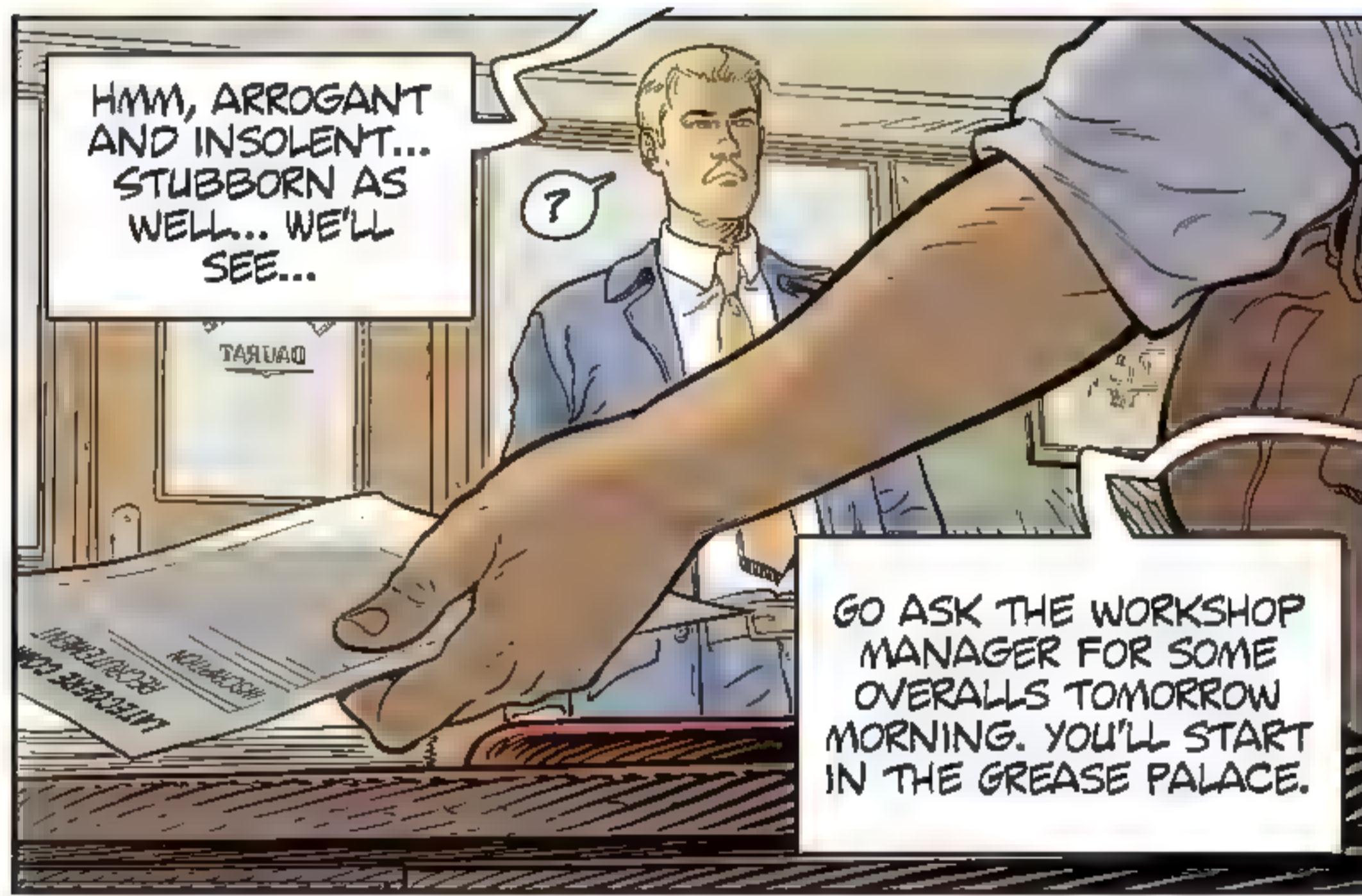
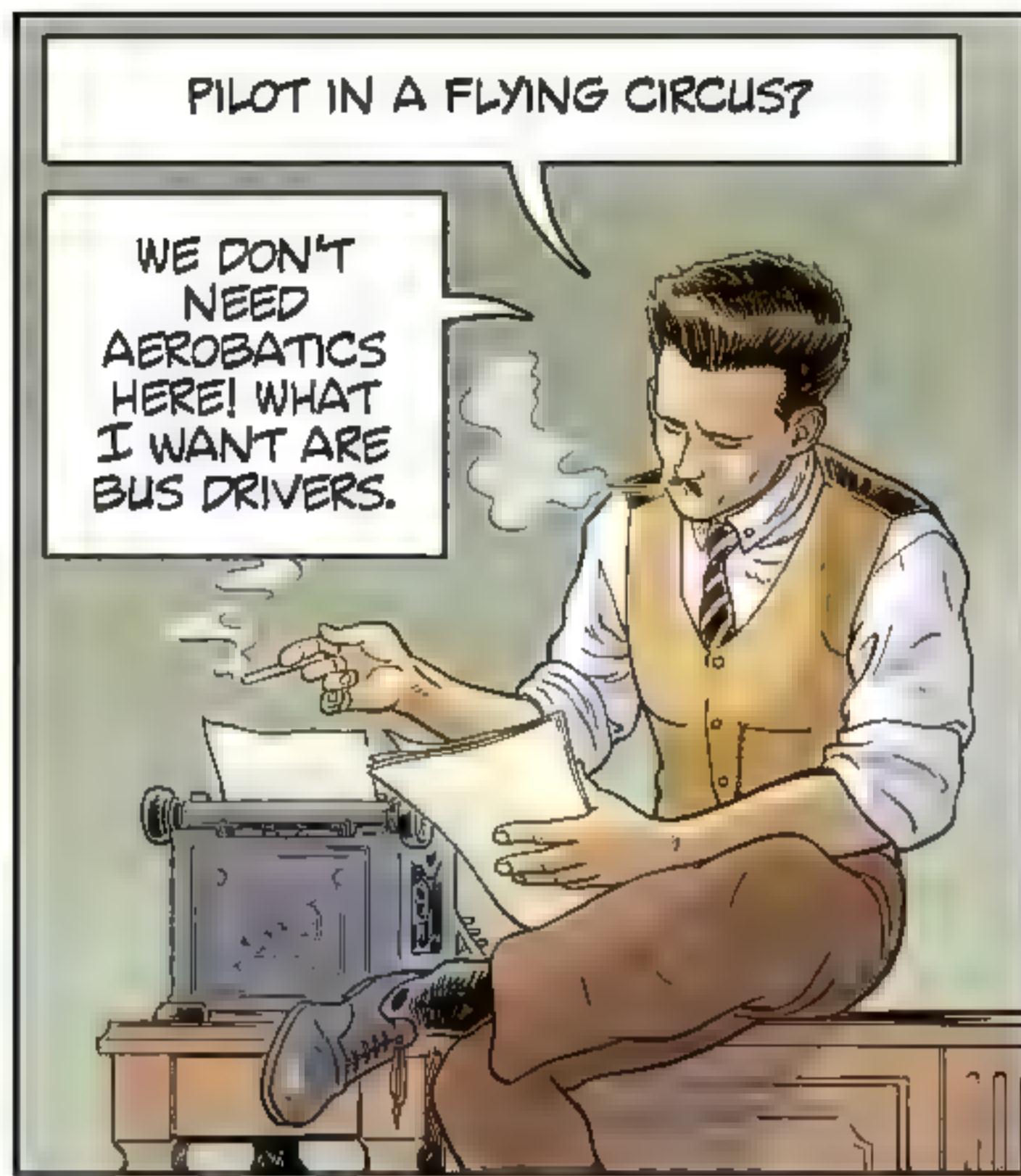


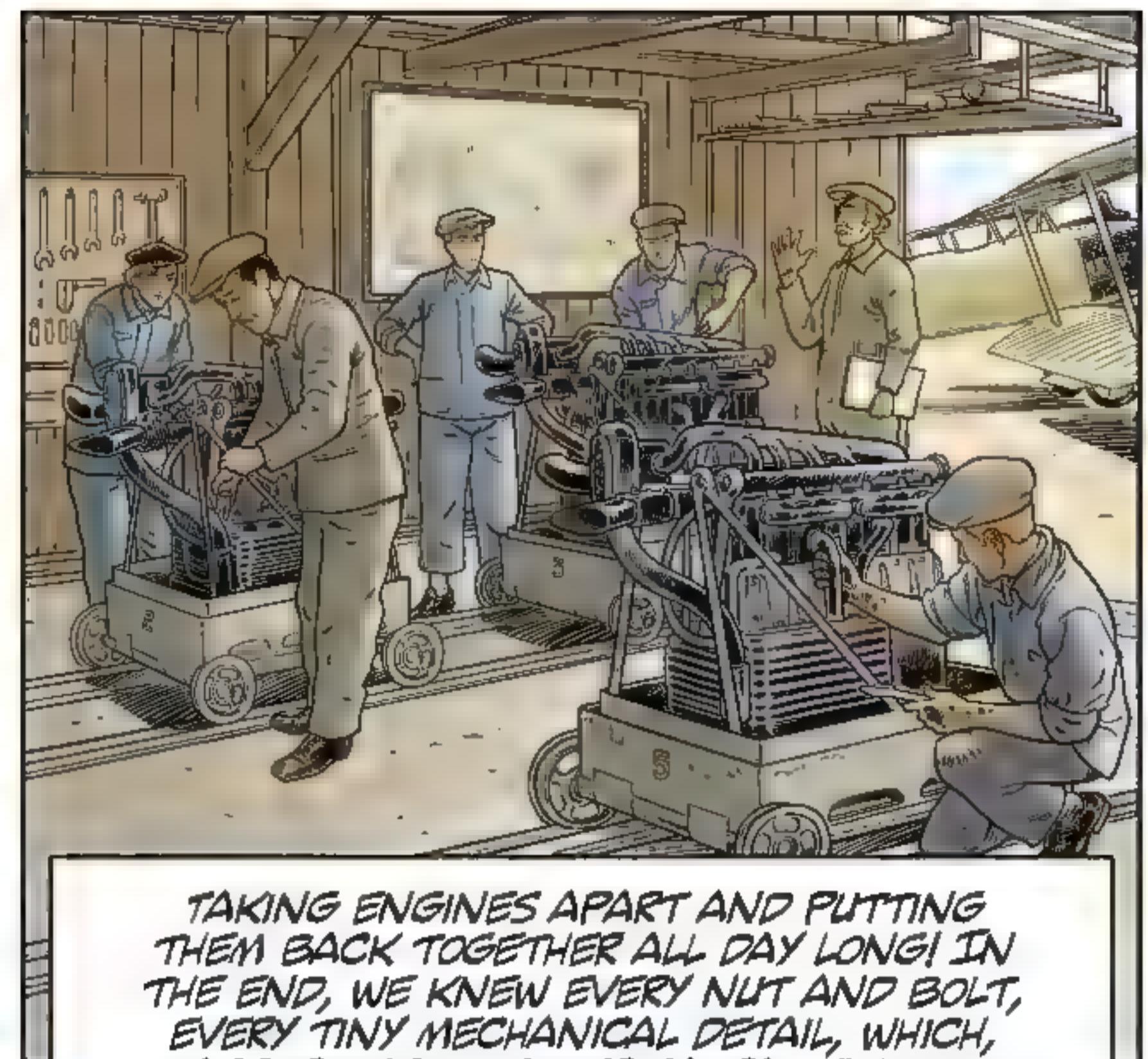
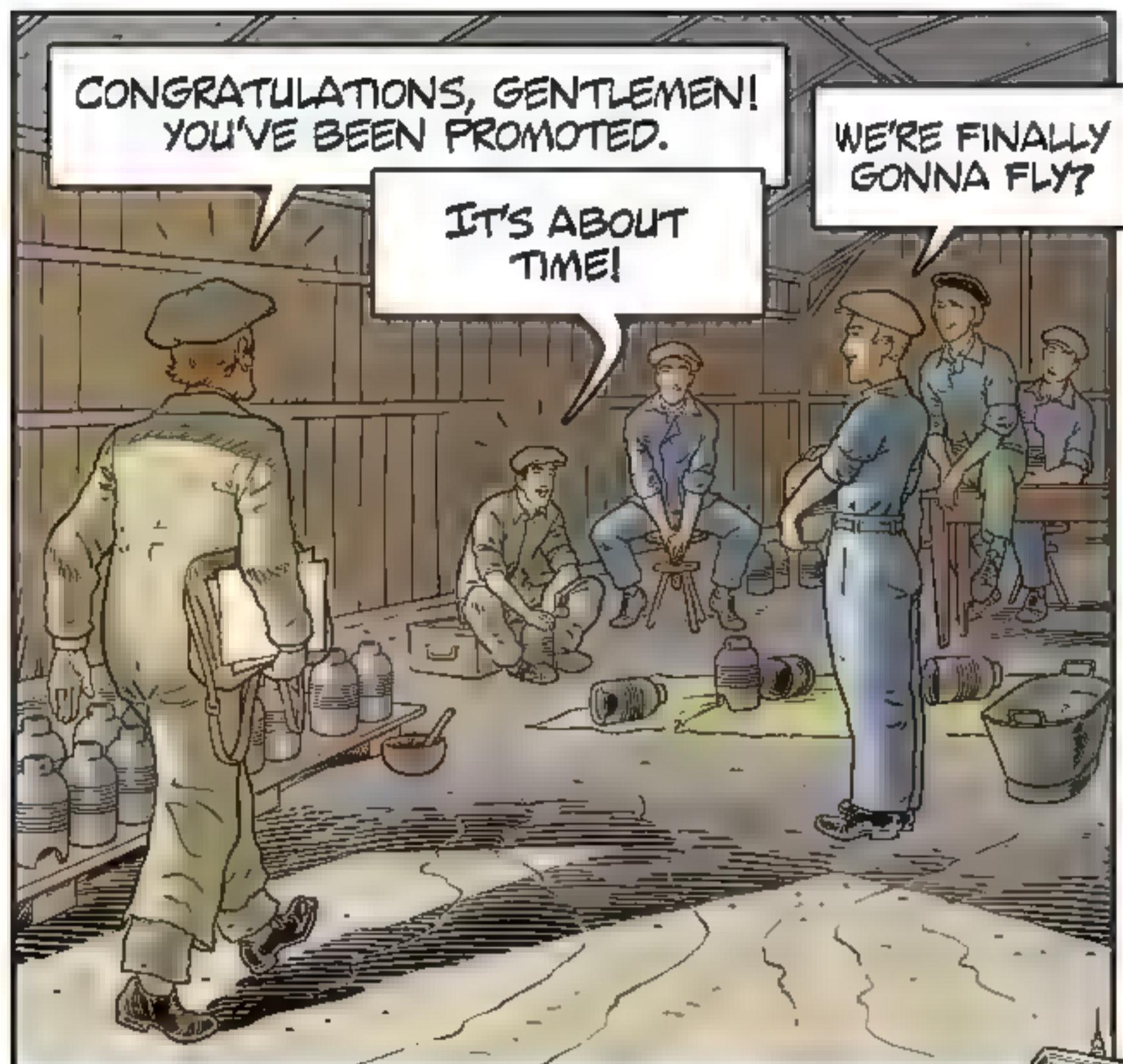
A GUY I ASSUMED TO BE MR. DAURAT CAME INTO THE ROOM SEVERAL TIMES AND TOTALLY IGNORED ME... AND HE DIDN'T LOOK LIKE THE SORT OF GUY YOU'D BE EAGER TO SAY HI TO.



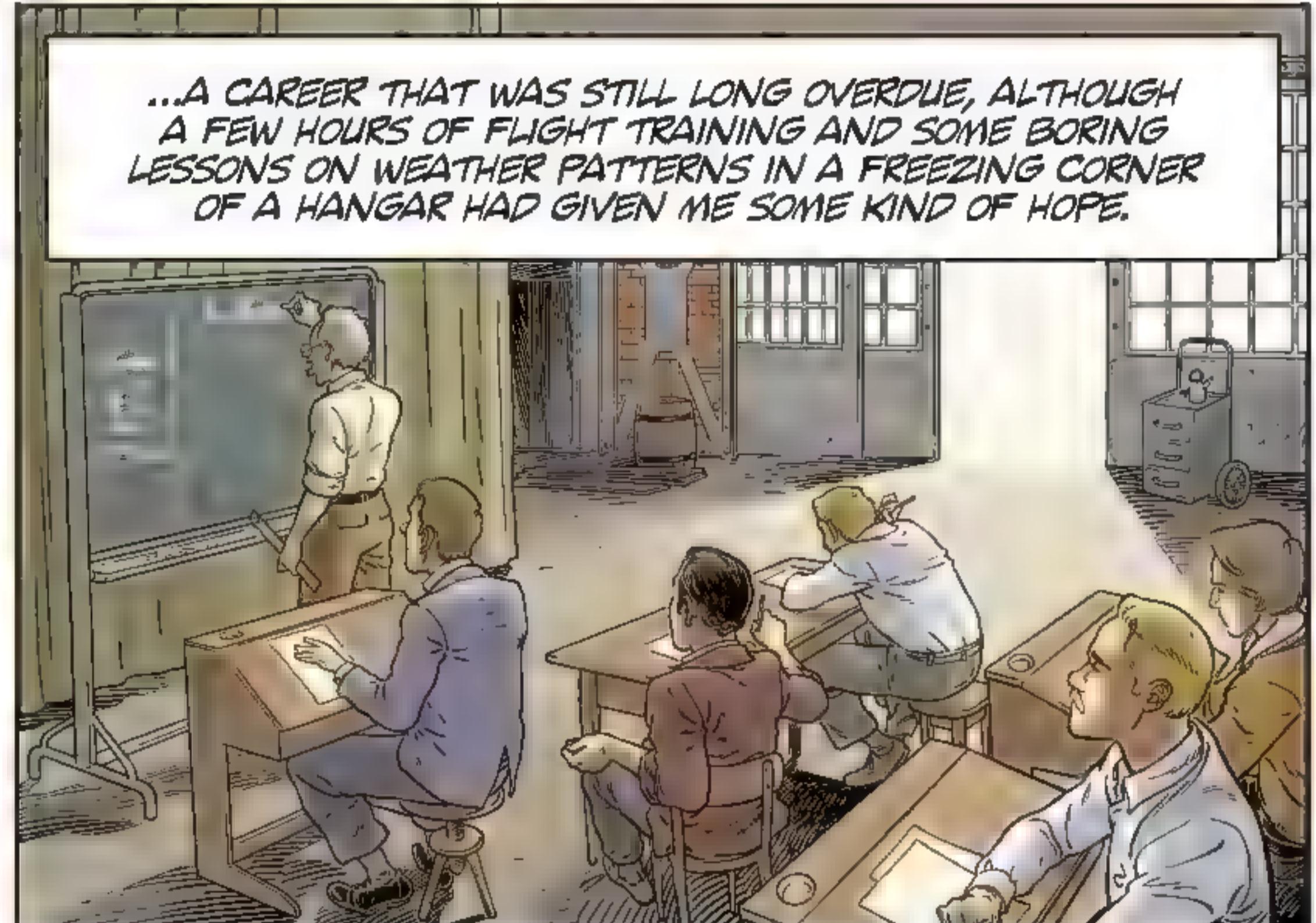
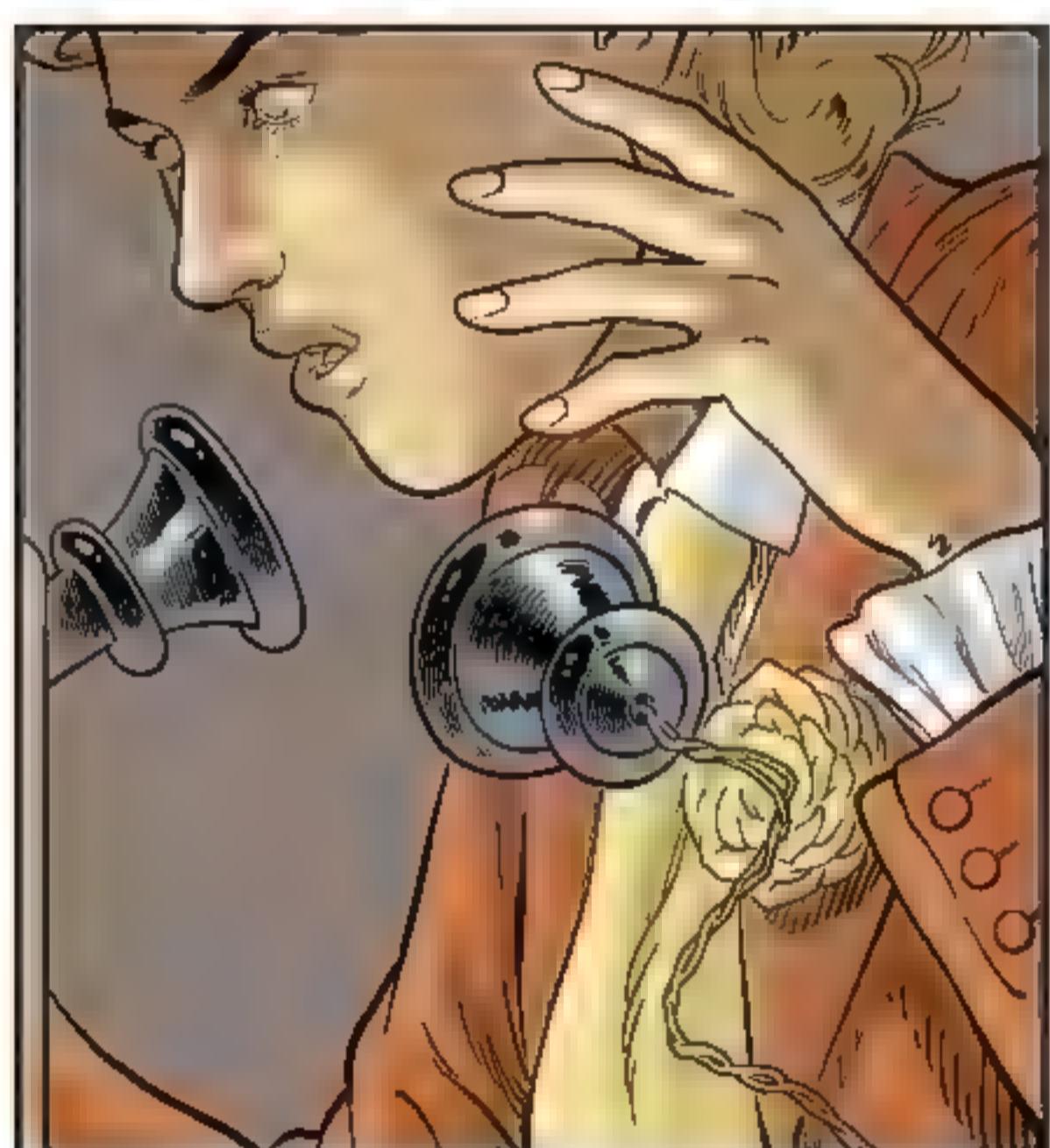
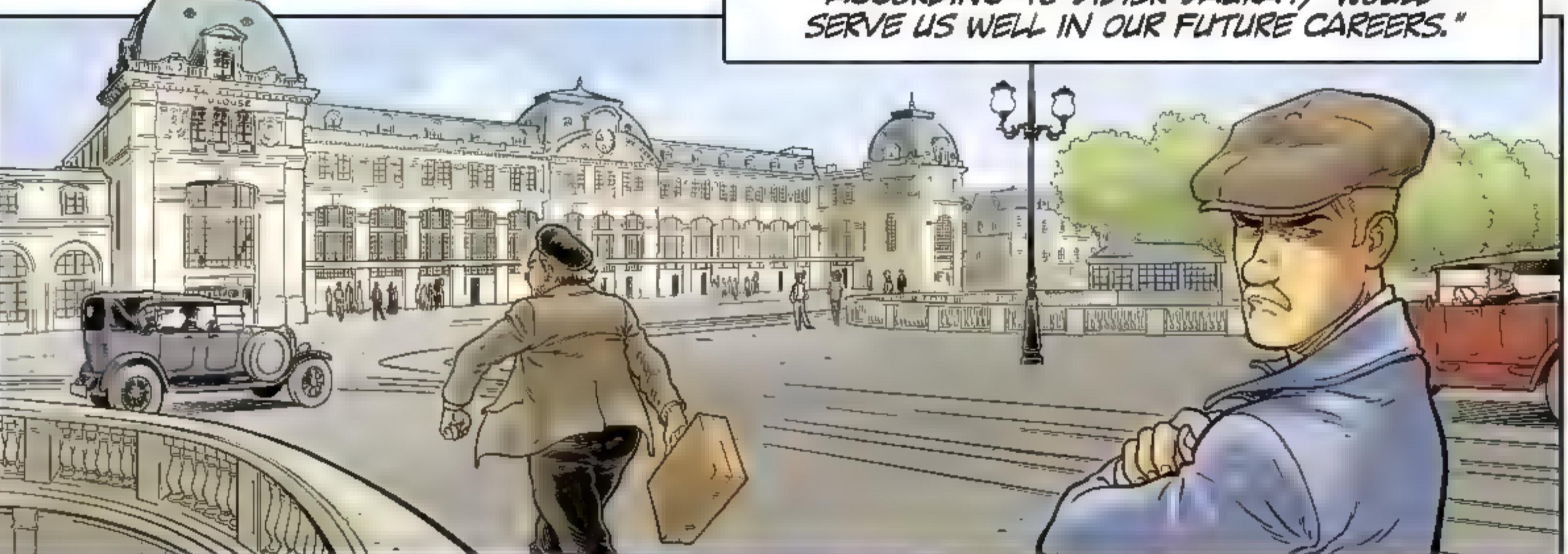
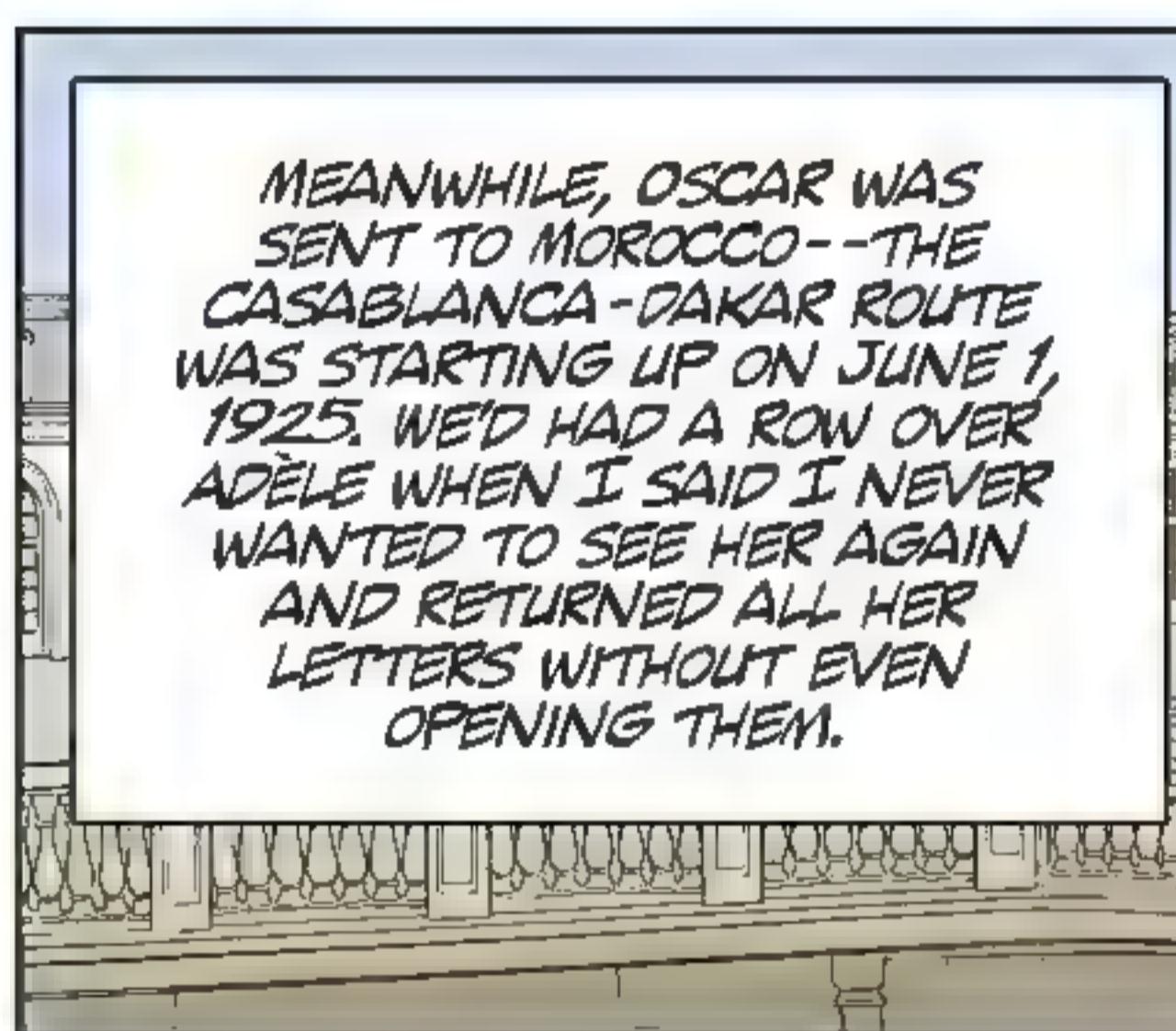
...STICKING IT OUT FOR THE WHOLE AFTERNOON LIKE A SENTRY ON DUTY. OSCAR CAME TO TELL ME THAT HE'D BEEN TAKEN ON AND THAT HE'D GET A ROOM FOR US BOTH AT A PLACE IN TOWN CALLED LE GRAND BALCON. I COULD GO FIND HIM THERE WHEN I WAS DONE.



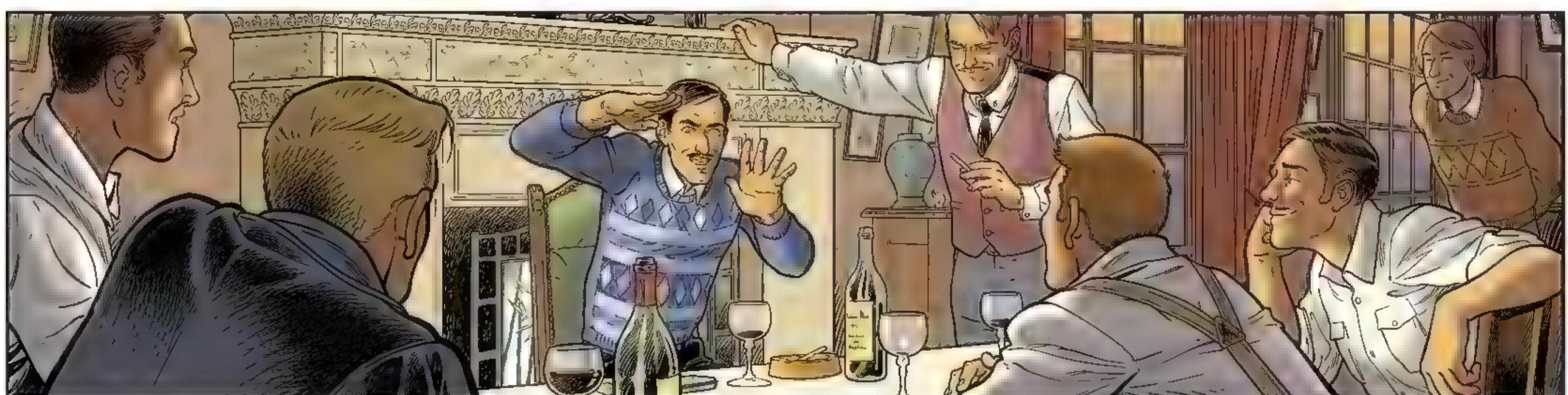




TAKING ENGINES APART AND PUTTING THEM BACK TOGETHER ALL DAY LONG! IN THE END, WE KNEW EVERY NUT AND BOLT, EVERY TINY MECHANICAL DETAIL, WHICH, ACCORDING TO DIDIER DAURAT, "WOULD SERVE US WELL IN OUR FUTURE CAREERS."



FOR ME AND THE OTHERS, THIS LONG APPRENTICESHIP--PUTTING PLANES TOGETHER IN THE WORKSHOP, AND LISTENING TO THE REAL PILOTS AT LE GRAND BALCON RECOUNTING THEIR ADVENTURES IN AFRICA--WAS, AGAIN ACCORDING TO DIDIER DAURAT, "A NECESSARY INCUBATION PERIOD TO ABSORB THE SPIRIT OF LATÉCOÈRE AND CONVERT TO THE RELIGION OF THE AIRMAIL SERVICE."



NAMELY THAT THE MAIL WAS SACROSANCT, AND MUST BE DELIVERED ON TIME WHATEVER THE WEATHER! WE'D SOMETIMES HEAR THAT A PILOT HAD SADLY CRASHED IN THE PYRENEES OR THE SIERRA NEVADA... (1)

...BUT EVEN THIS DIDN'T DULL OUR ENTHUSIASM. IN FACT, WE WERE SO FULL OF OURSELVES THAT WE SAW IT AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE HIS PLACE.

ALL FIVE OF YOU, ON THE RUNWAY TOMORROW AT 6:30 A.M.!

OUR TURN AT LAST! DAURAT WAS PUTTING US TO THE TEST.

WE TURNED IN EARLY, BUT OF COURSE COULDN'T SLEEP.

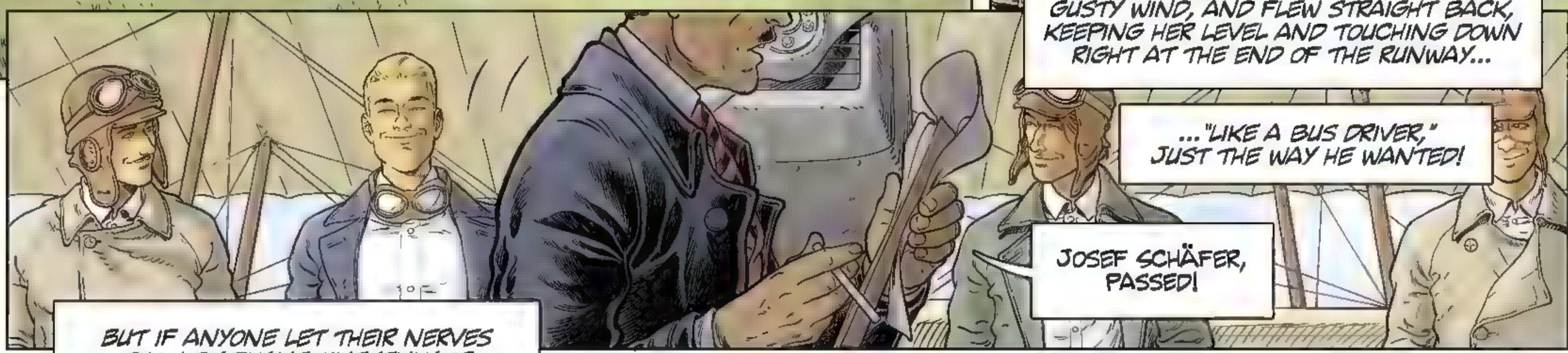


(1) MEANING "SNOW-CLAD RANGE" IN SPANISH, IT TOPS OUT AT OVER 11,000 FT.

I WAS THE FIRST TO GO UP. AN OLD HAND WHO KNEW I'D FLOWN WITH THE TIGERS HAD WARNED ME NOT TO DO ANY AEROBATICS--"MR. SIBERIA" HATED THAT. TWO MONTHS EARLIER, MERMOZ HAD TRIED TO IMPRESS HIM WITH SOME STUNTS AND WAS ALMOST FIRED ON THE SPOT.



SO I SIMPLY CLIMBED TO 700 FEET, MADE A SMOOTH TURN DESPITE THE GUSTY WIND, AND FLEW STRAIGHT BACK, KEEPING HER LEVEL AND TOUCHING DOWN RIGHT AT THE END OF THE RUNWAY...



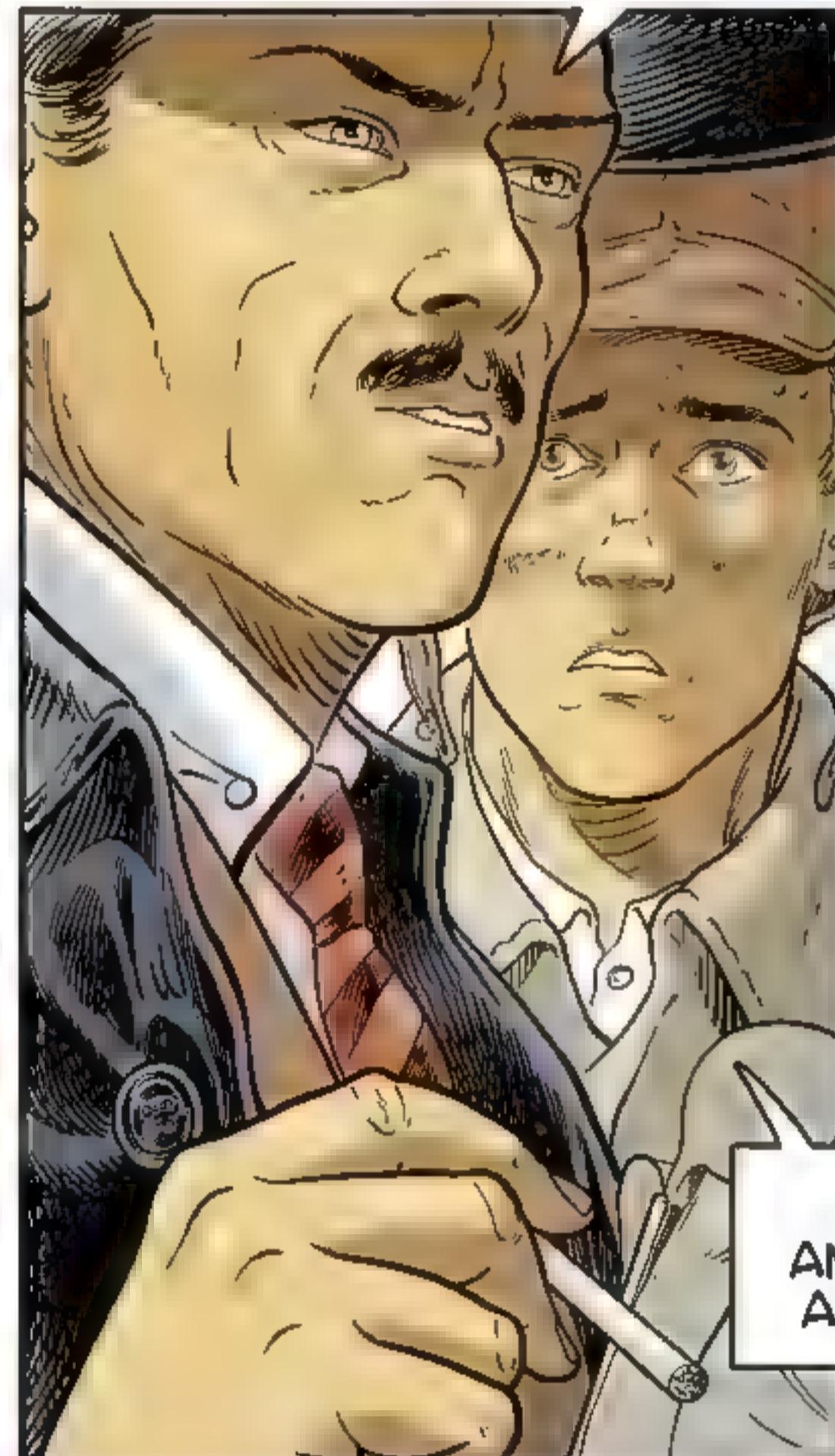
BUT IF ANYONE LET THEIR NERVES SHOW BY FLYING UNEVENLY OR HESITANTLY, THE BIG BOSS WAS MERCILESS IN HIS CONDEMNATION.

JOSEF SCHÄFER, PASSED!

VINCENT DE MANNEUR, FAILED.

BUT I--

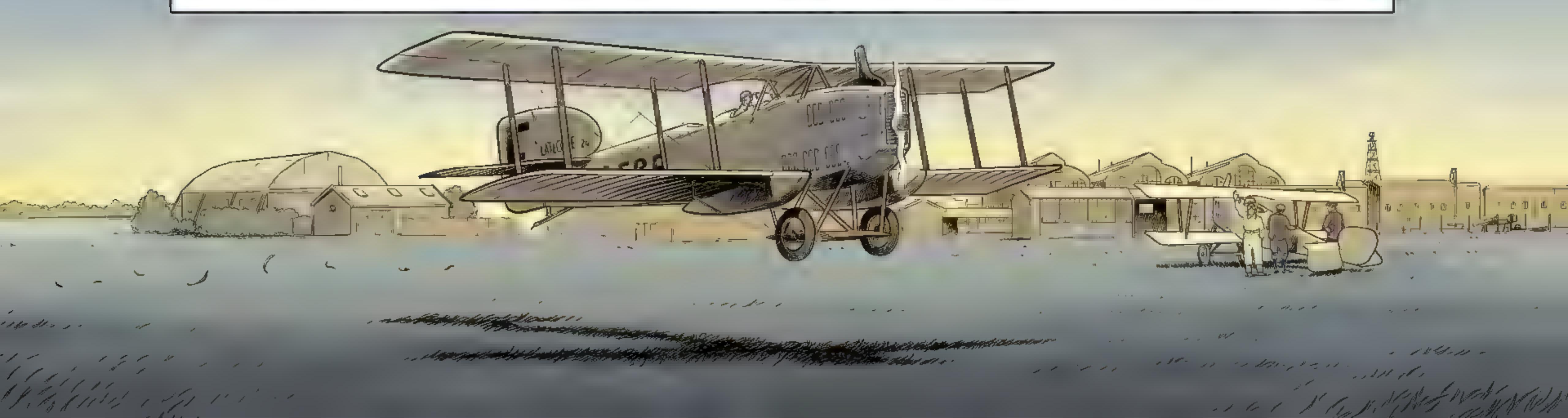
I JUST SAVED YOUR LIFE, YOUNG MAN. YOU NEED NERVES OF STEEL TO SURVIVE A STORM IN THE MOUNTAINS. FIND ANOTHER CAREER...



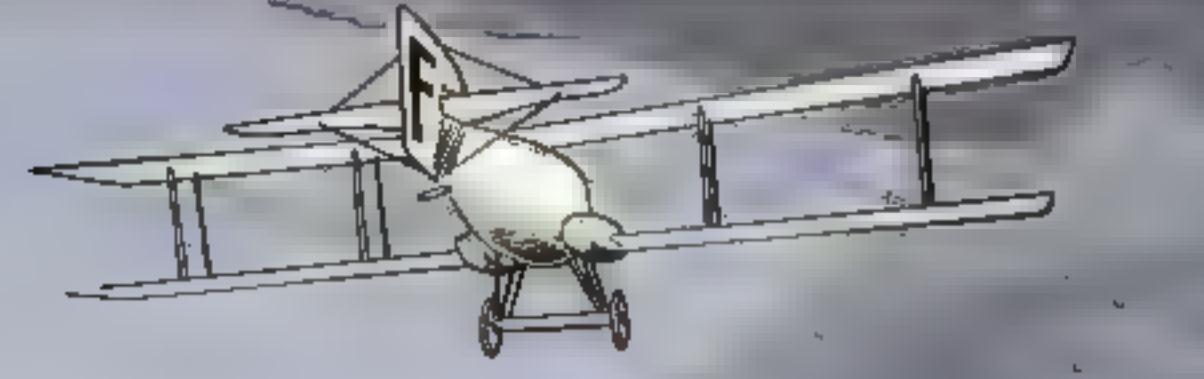
NEXT!



THE VERY NEXT MORNING, I TOOK THE MAIL TO BARCELONA IN A STURDY OLD BREGUET XIV. I WAS TO OPERATE THE BARCELONA-MALAGA LEG WITH TWO OTHER PILOTS. AND WHAT A LEG IT WAS! OVER 600 MILES--SEVEN HOURS' FLYING IF THE WEATHER WAS KIND. AND IF IT WASN'T, YOU NEVER KNEW HOW LONG IT MIGHT TAKE.



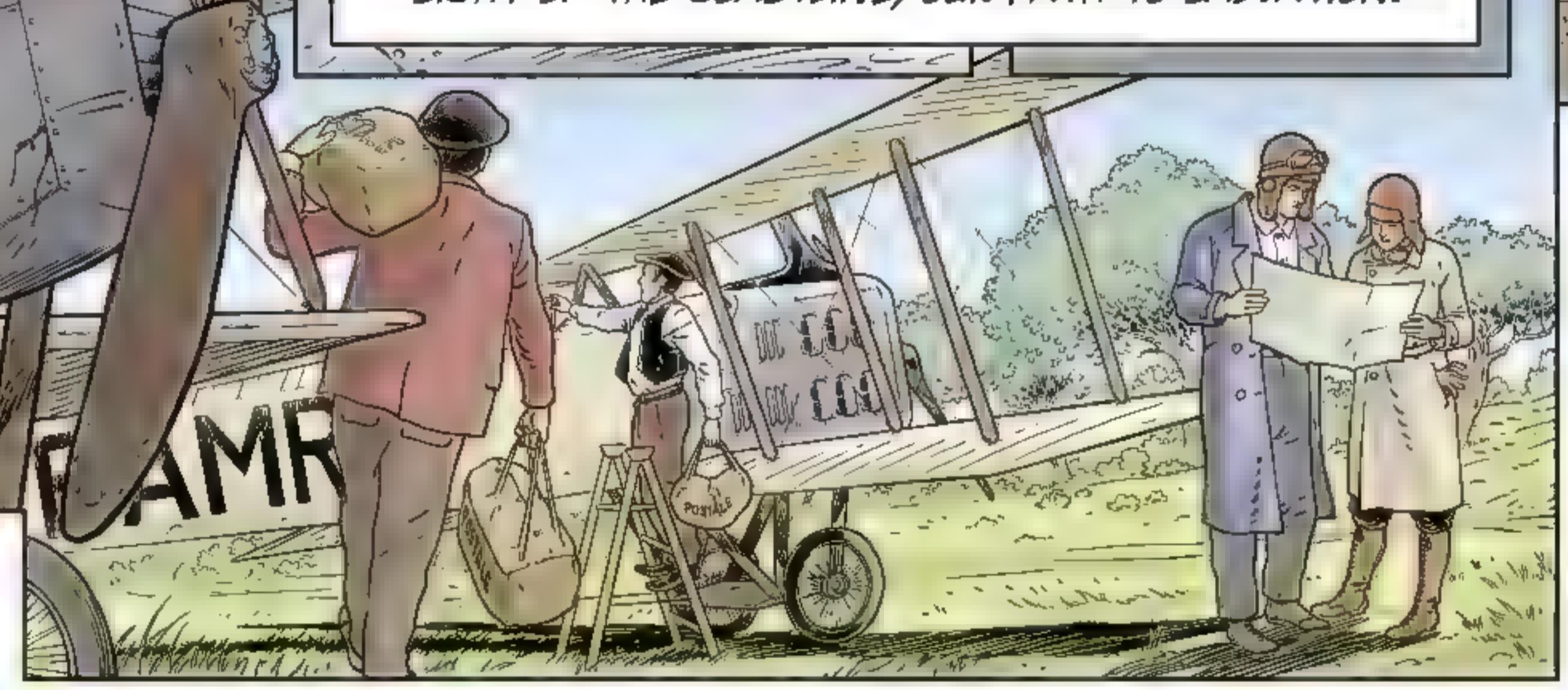
WE'D FLY ALONG THE COAST AS FAR AS ALICANTE, THEN CUT ACROSS THE SIERRA NEVADA TO MALAGA. ONE WRONG COMPASS BEARING, AND WE MIGHT SMASH INTO A STRAY PEAK. WE DIDN'T HAVE ENOUGH FUEL TO GO AROUND THE MOUNTAINS, AND THE BREGUET XIV WASN'T POWERFUL ENOUGH TO FLY ABOVE STORMS.



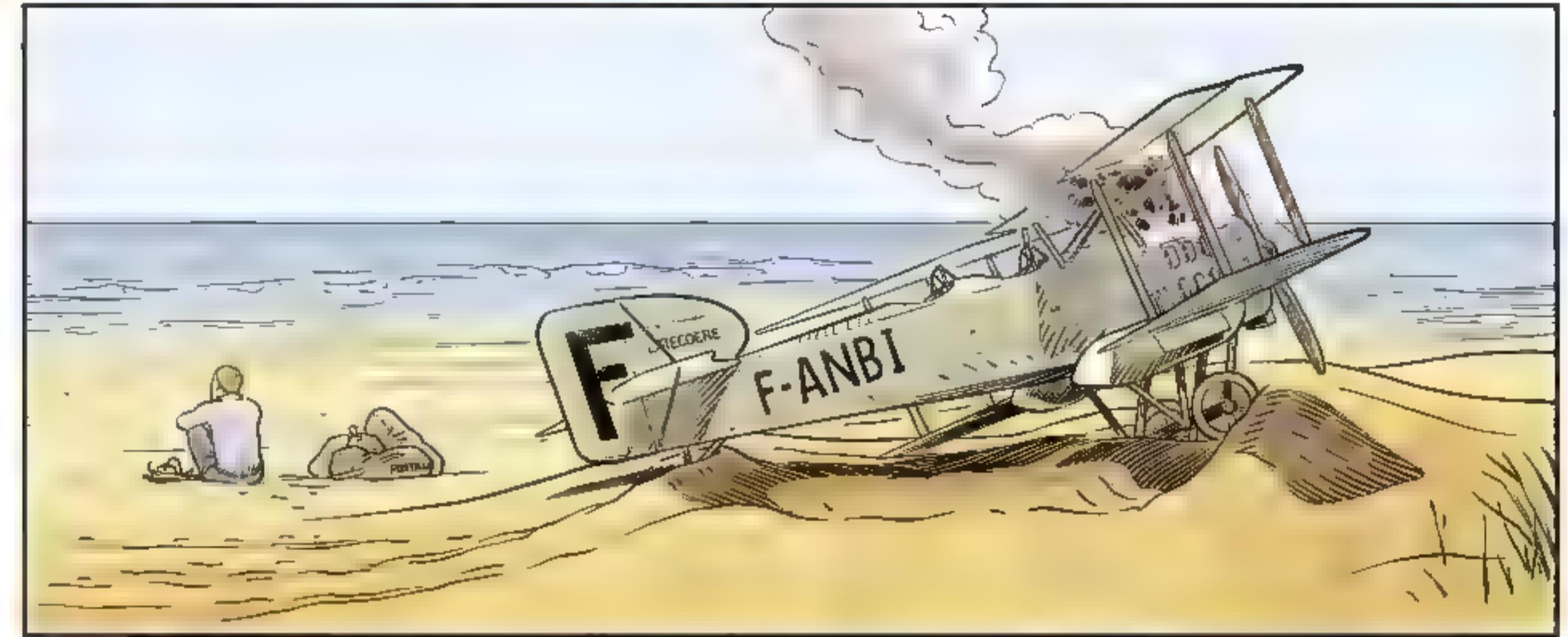
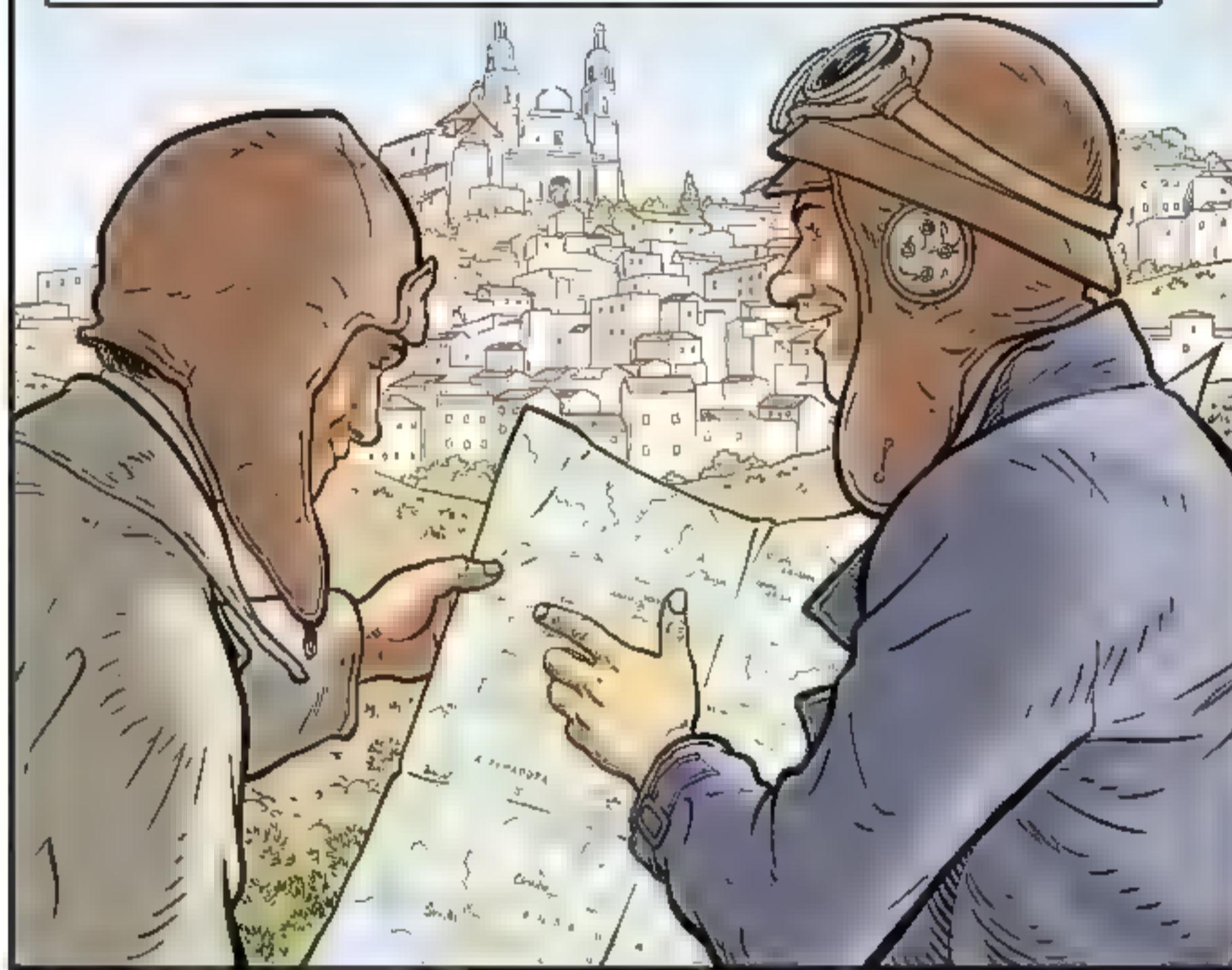
AS SOON AS WE LANDED IN MALAGA, WE HAD TO TRANSFER THE MAIL TO ANOTHER PLANE-- ITS ENGINE ALREADY RUNNING-- TO BE TAKEN ON TO MOROCCO.

SO IT BECAME A PHYSICAL STRUGGLE WITH THE ELEMENTS--CONSTANTLY CORRECTING THE SUDDEN RISING AND FALLING OF THE AIRPLANE, KEEPING AN EYE ON ALL OF THE INSTRUMENTS, AND NOT LOSING SIGHT OF THE COASTLINE, OUR PATH TO SALVATION.

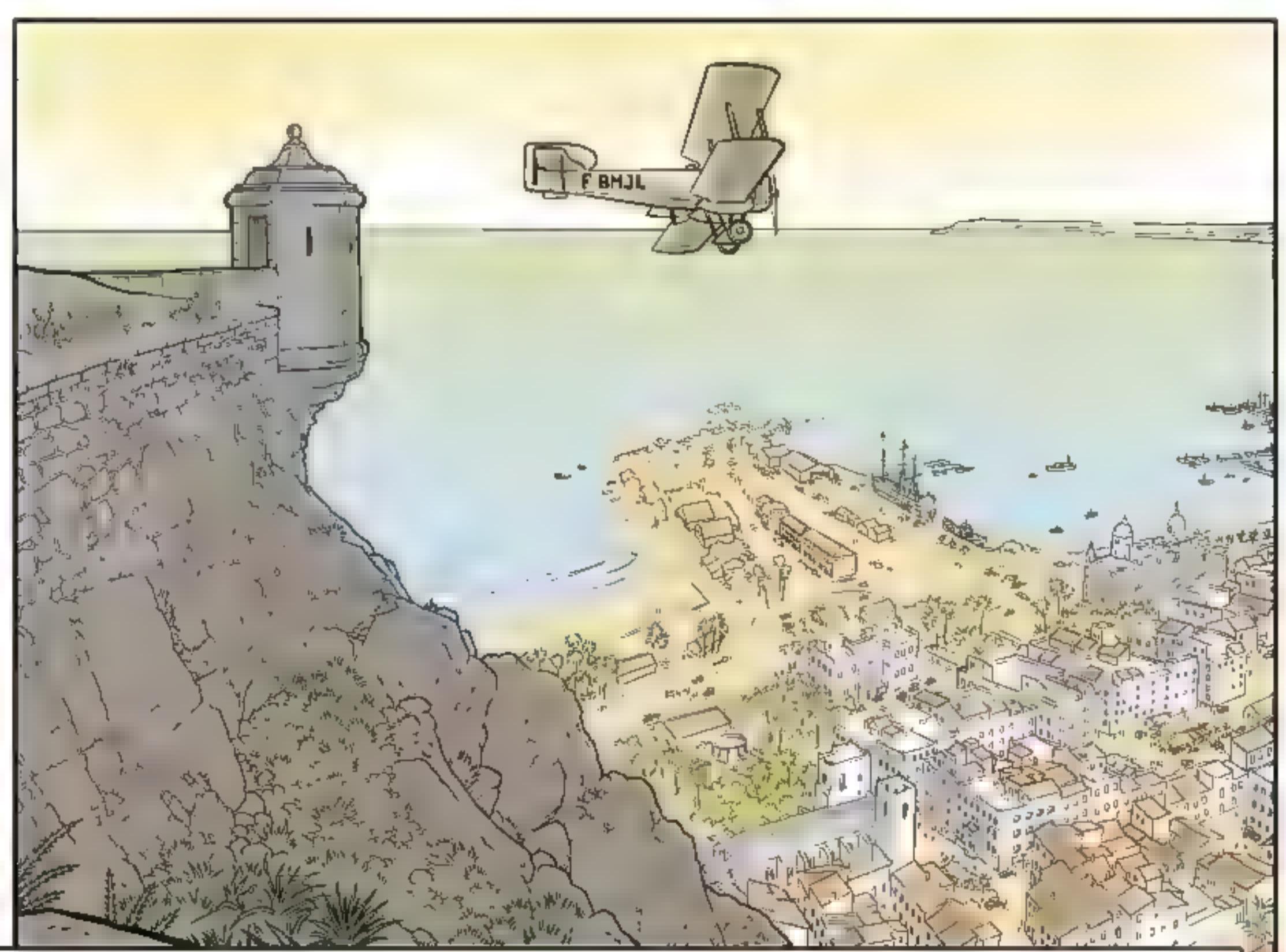
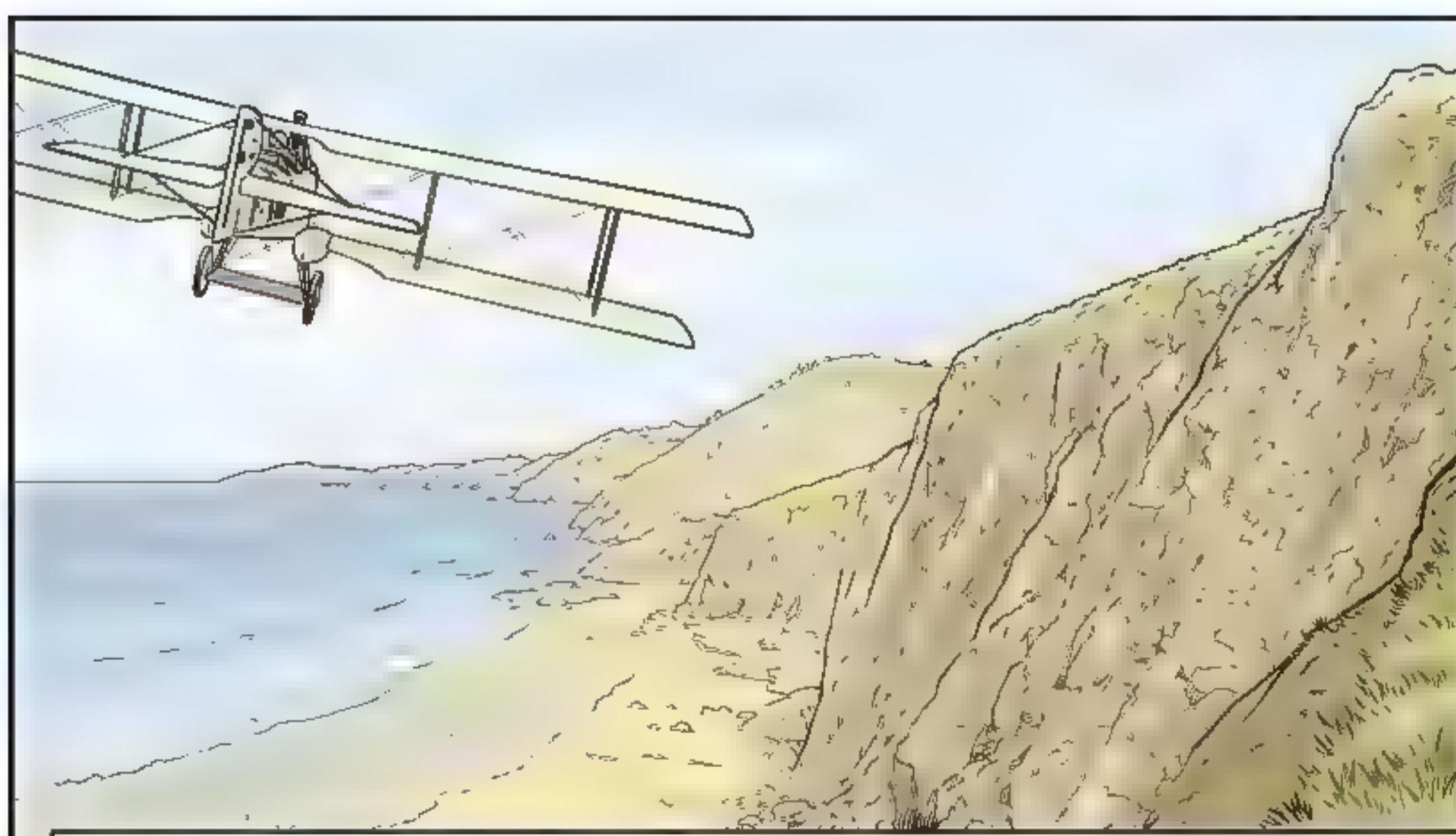
I LEARNED TO IDENTIFY EVERY LANDMARK ALONG THE ROUTE--RIVERS, BOULDERS, FARMS-- AS WELL AS PLACES TO LAND IF THE ENGINE CONKED OUT... WHICH IT DID OFTEN, HAVING BEEN PATCHED UP SO MANY TIMES.



THIS MADE ME WONDER ABOUT THE WAY THE BUSINESS WORLD WAS RUN. HERE I WAS IN 1925, HAVING SPENT MONTHS BUILDING BRAND NEW PLANES FOR LATÉCOÈRE, NOW FULFILLING THE GREAT DREAM OF LINKING THE CONTINENTS IN A MACHINE THAT HAD BEEN DESIGNED BEFORE THE GREAT WAR!



BUT THE MAIL HAD TO BE DELIVERED, SOMETIMES ALONG WITH A PASSENGER OR TWO SQUATTING NERVOUSLY AMONG THE SACKS. SO I WENT ON RISKING MY LIFE BECAUSE I LOVED FLYING, AND IN THE END I WAS HAPPY TO HAVE CONVERTED MY PRIMITIVE INSTINCTS INTO WHAT I TOOK TO BE A NOBLE ENTERPRISE.



MY THIRST FOR ADVENTURE THEN DREW ME TO THE CASABLANCA-DAKAR ROUTE, WHICH HAD OPENED SOME MONTHS EARLIER. I KNEW THAT DAURAT WAS LOOKING FOR NEW PILOTS TO MAKE UP THE LOSSES THAT ILLNESS, MARAUDING BEDOUIN, OR THE DESERT ITSELF HAD ALREADY CAUSED IN AFRICA. BUT SO FAR HE'D REJECTED MY APPLICATIONS.

ONE DAY, I ARRIVED IN ALICANTE AFTER A DIFFICULT FLIGHT. FOR ONCE, I WAS TO STAY PUT.

ANOTHER PILOT, WHO WAS BASED IN AFRICA, WOULD BE TAKING MY PLANE ON TO MALAGA AND THE NEXT DAY TO MOROCCO.

AS IT HAPPENED, I WASN'T TOO UNHAPPY ABOUT THE CHANGE OF ROUTINE.

NICE LANDING, MR. SCHÄFER!

THANKS, JUANJO!

THERE'S NO WAY I CAN TAKE OFF IN THIS WEATHER!

YES...

...YOU CAN!

YOU KNOW THE RULES, DON'T YOU?

YOU'RE NOT THE ONE RISKING YOUR LIFE!

I RISKED IT IN MY DAY...

FOR THE MAIL, I KNOW! BUT IT CAN WAIT A DAY, CAN'T IT?!



THE WORLD WON'T COME TO AN END! PEOPLE WILL STILL GO ABOUT THEIR BUSINESS, RIGHT?!

I SEE! SO YOU GET TO DECIDE HOW THE WORLD SHOULD BE RUN NOW, DO YOU?



UH... N-NO...

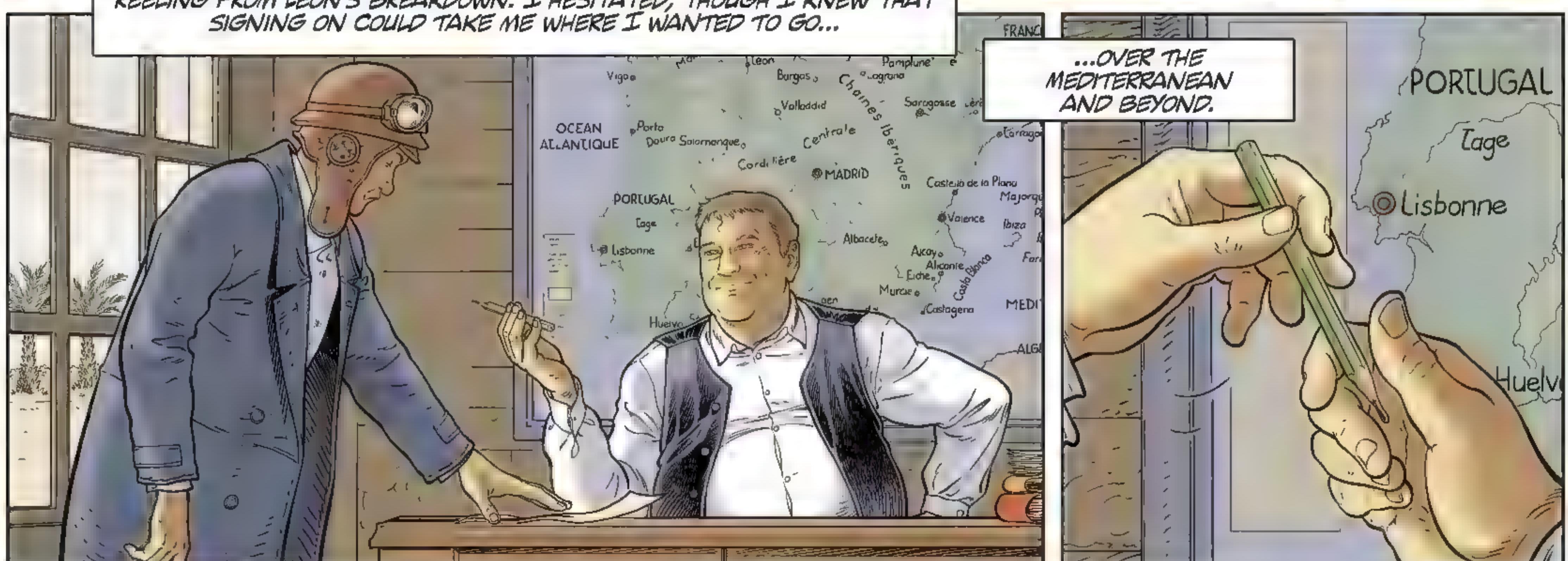
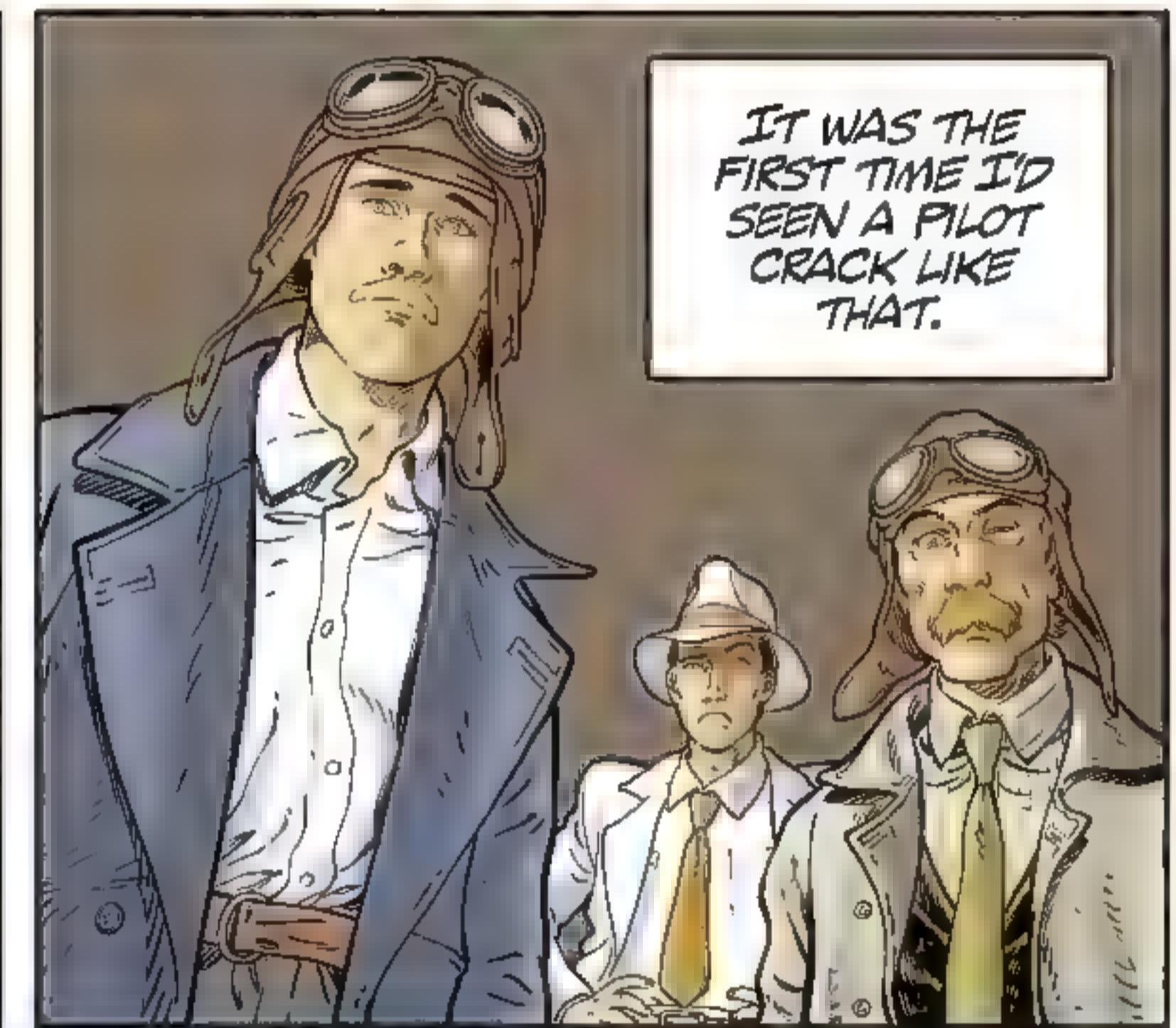
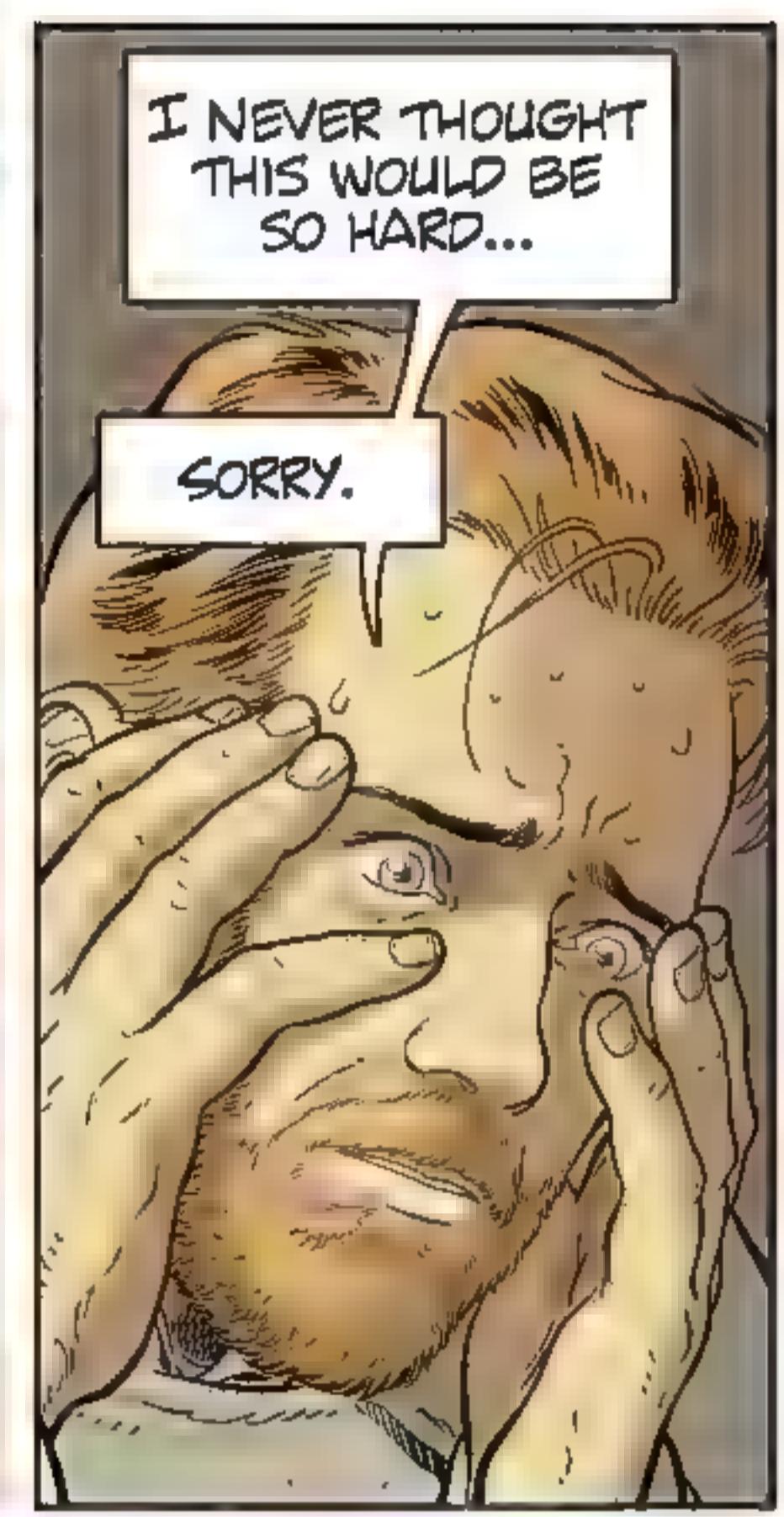
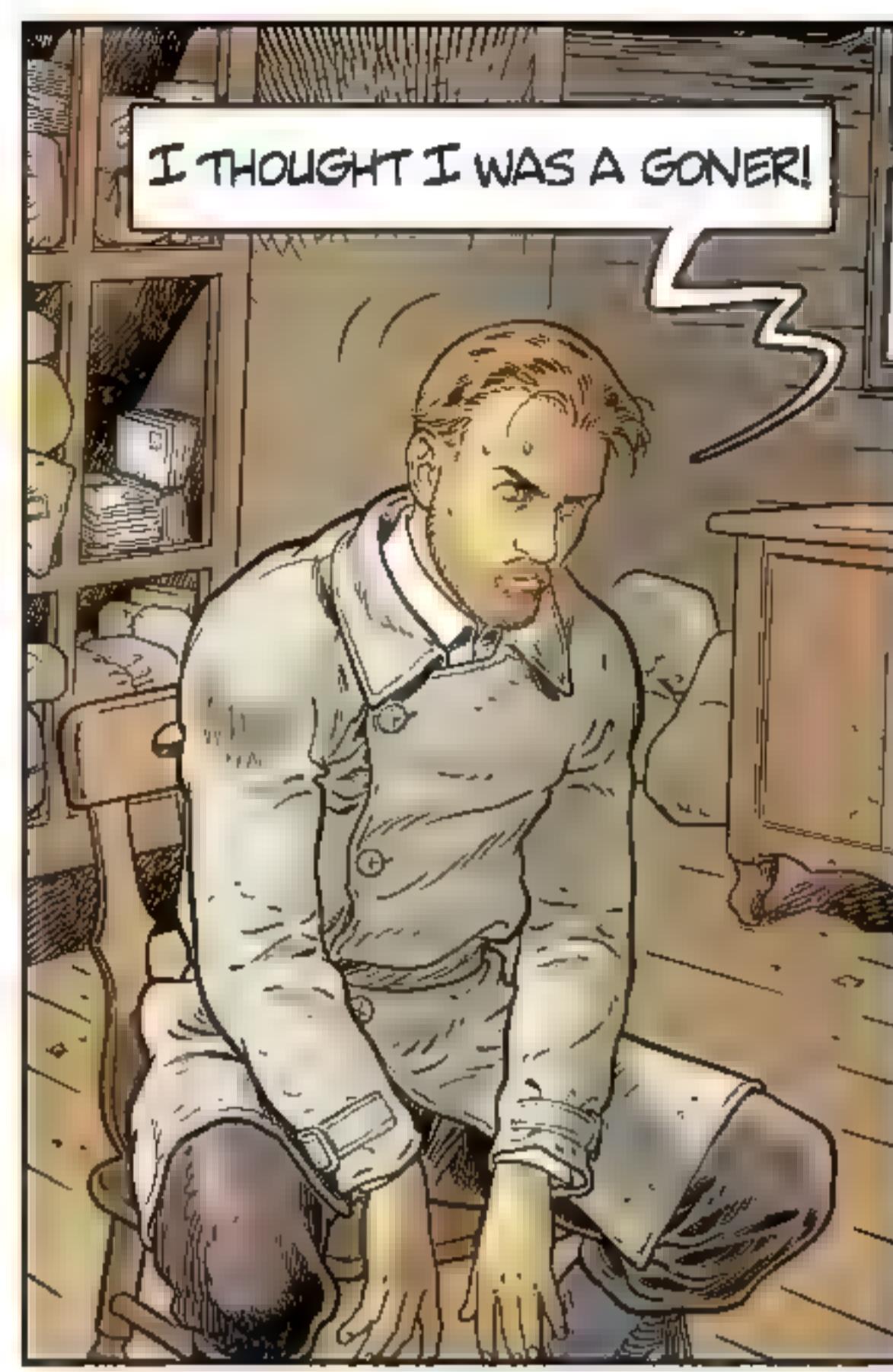
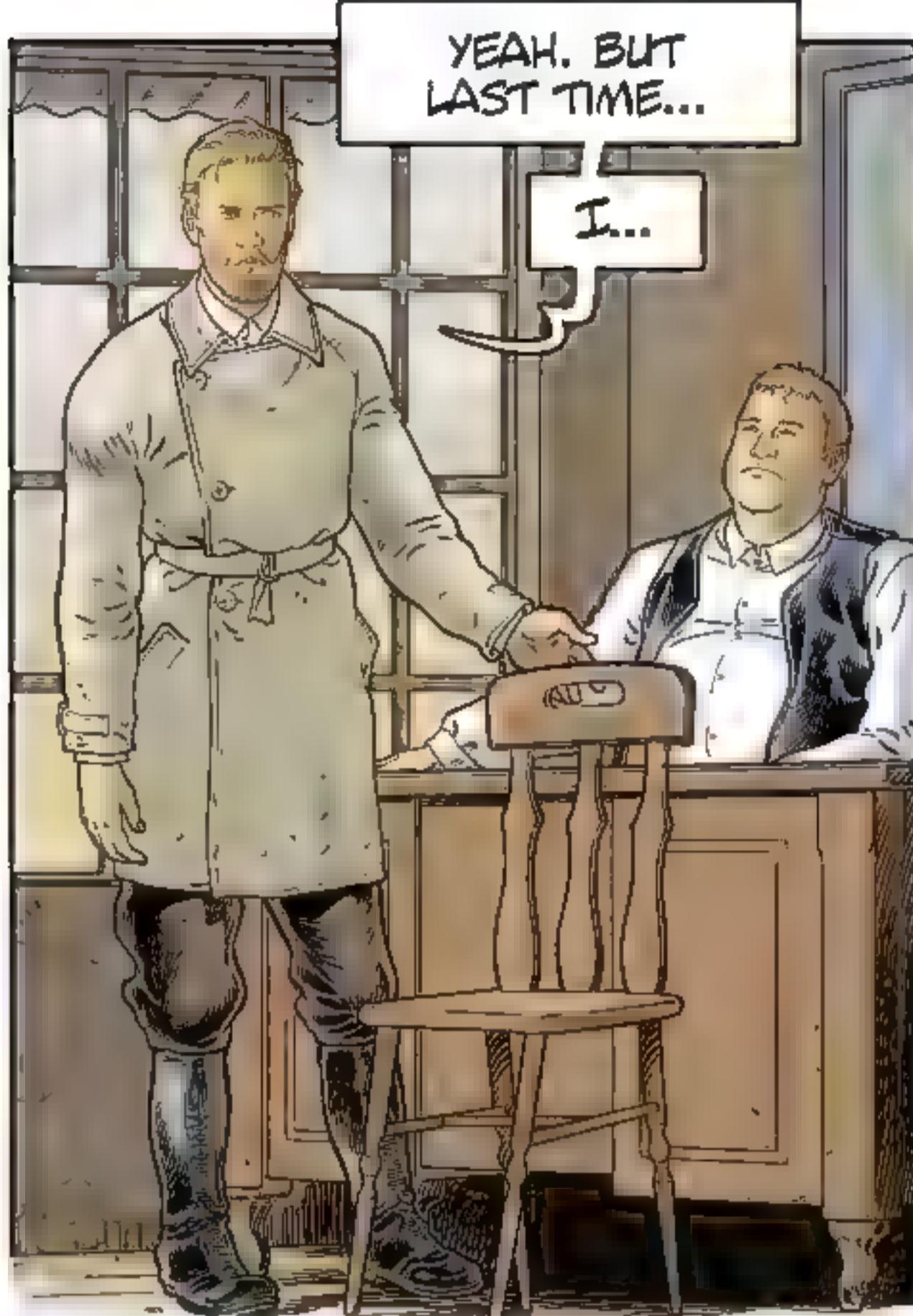
...BUT I DECIDE WHETHER I LIVE OR DIE.

WELL, NO ONE'S FORCING YOU.

I'M TOLD THE WIND'S GONNA DROP IN MALAGA.



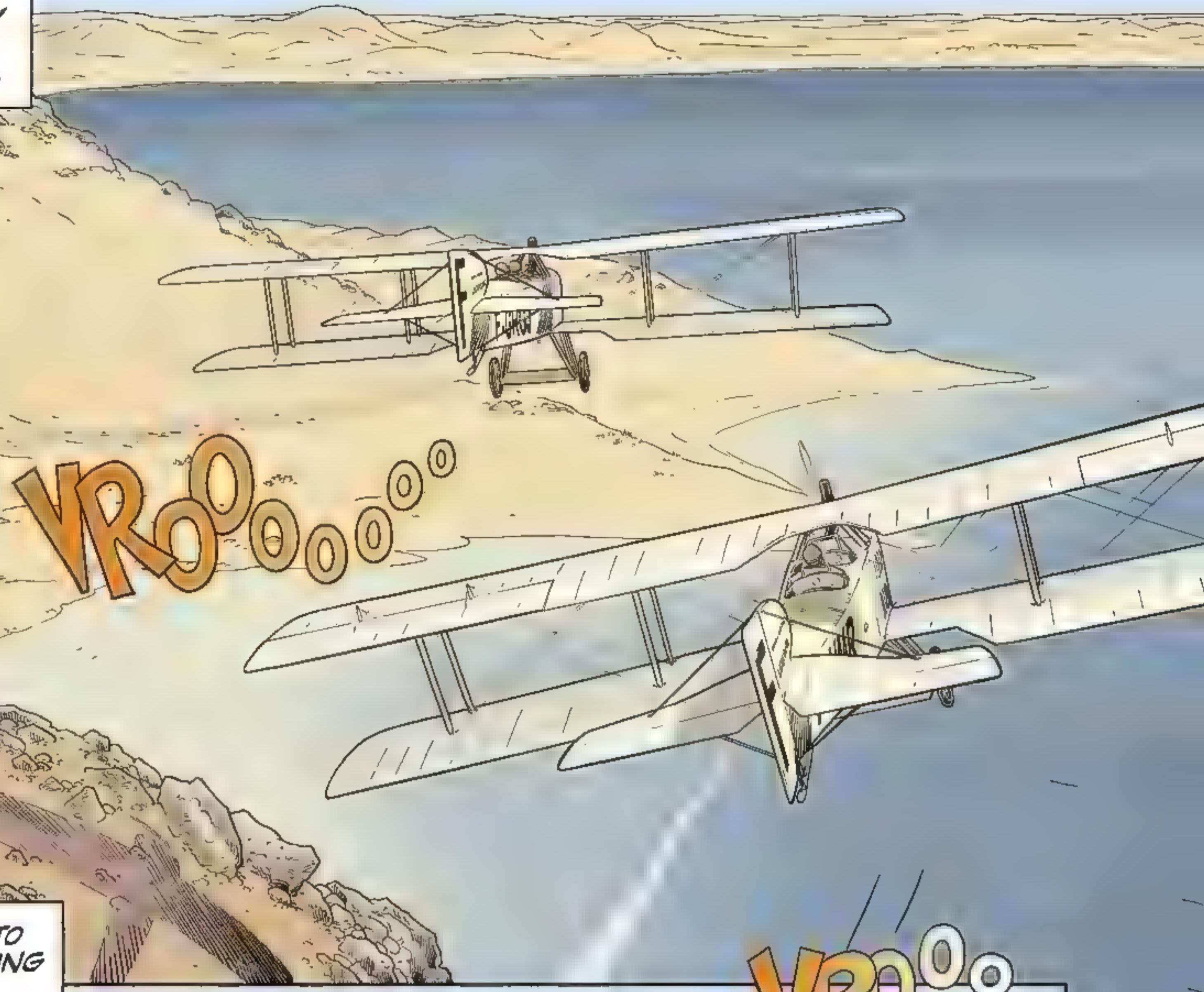
AND IF IT DOESN'T?



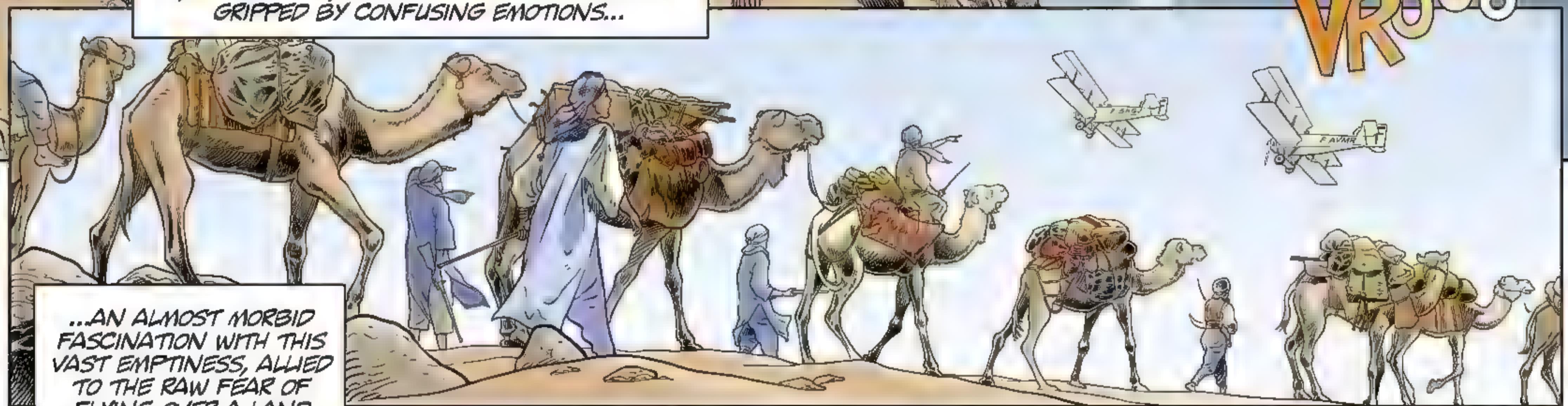
AND THAT WAS WHAT HAPPENED--ALTHOUGH I HAD TO SPEND OVER TWO MONTHS HOPPING BETWEEN MOROCCO AND ALGERIA BEFORE MY DREAM OF GRAND ADVENTURE BECAME A REALITY.



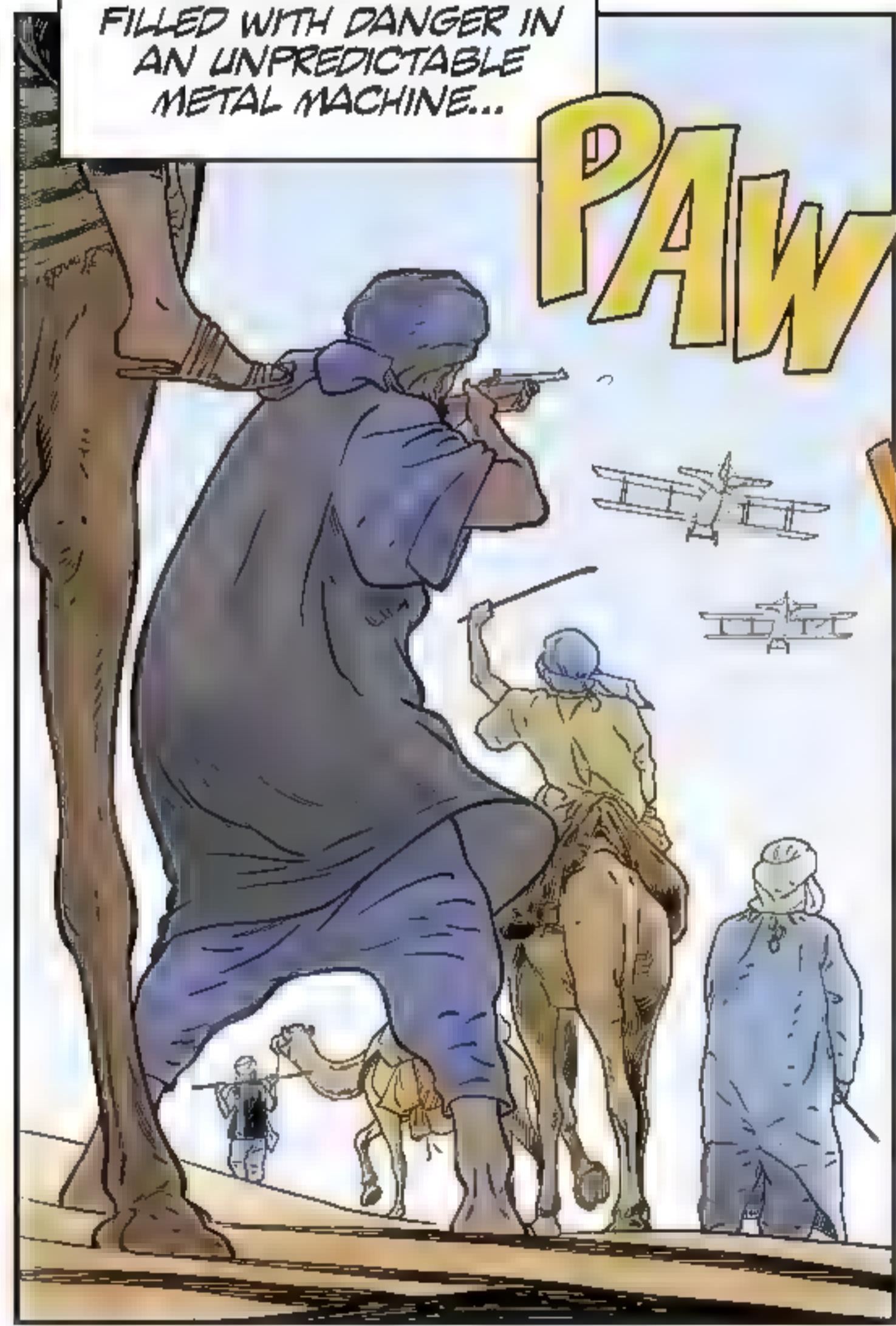
AT LAST! LEAVING TIZNIT BEHIND ME, I'D PASSED THE LAST OUTPOST OF THE CIVILIZED WORLD. I FINALLY FLEW OUT OVER THE DAZZLING HELL OF THE DESERT WHERE THE DISSIDENT SOUTH MOROCCAN ZONE BEGAN.



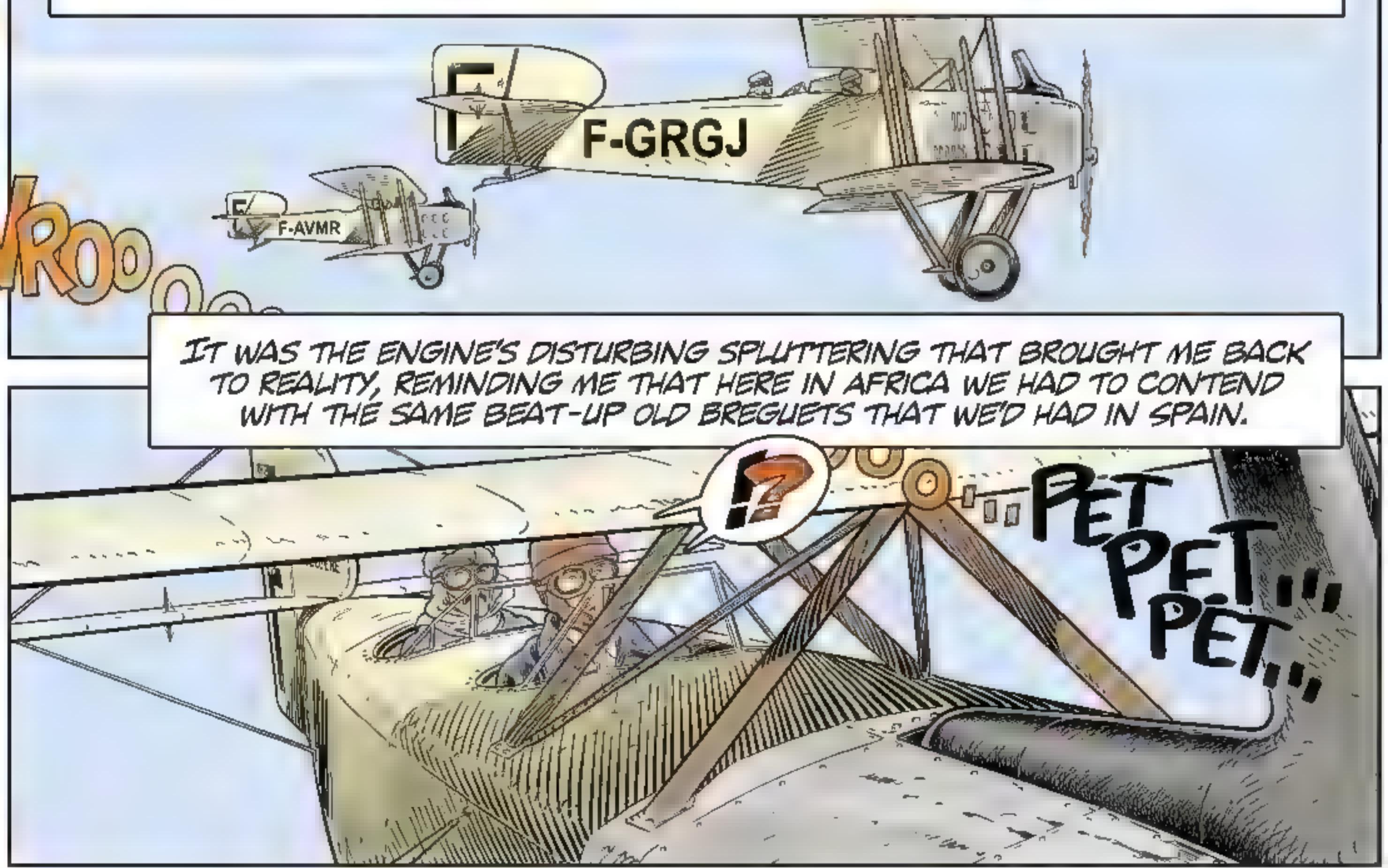
THE OLD HANDS HAD TOLD ME, EXPLAINED TO ME, WARNED ME, BUT IT DIDN'T STOP ME BEING GRIPPED BY CONFUSING EMOTIONS...



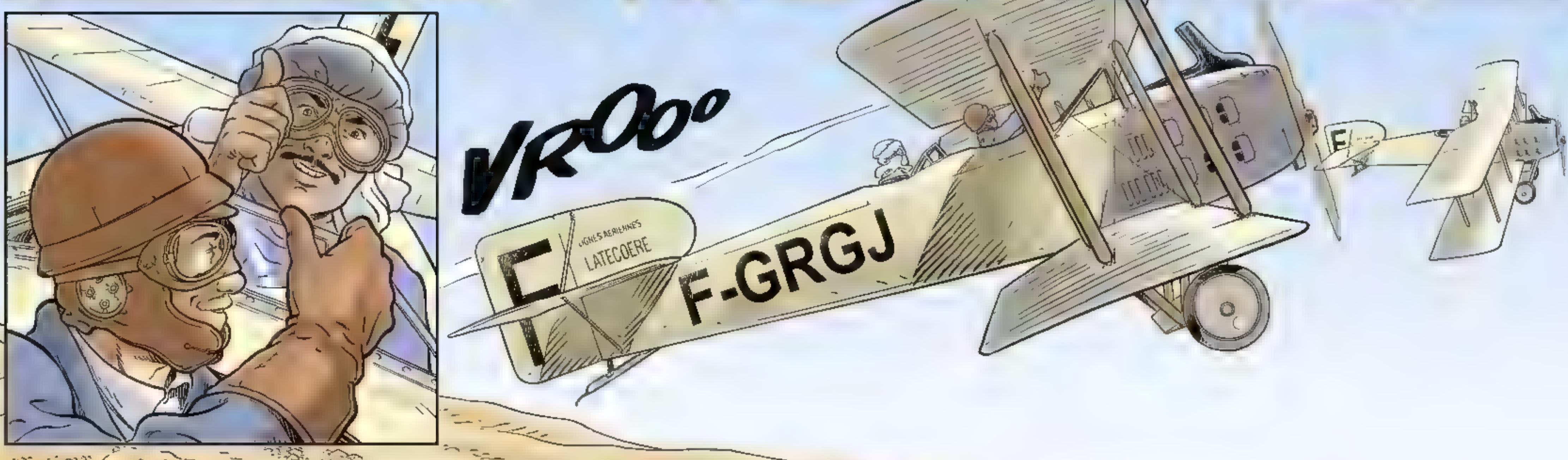
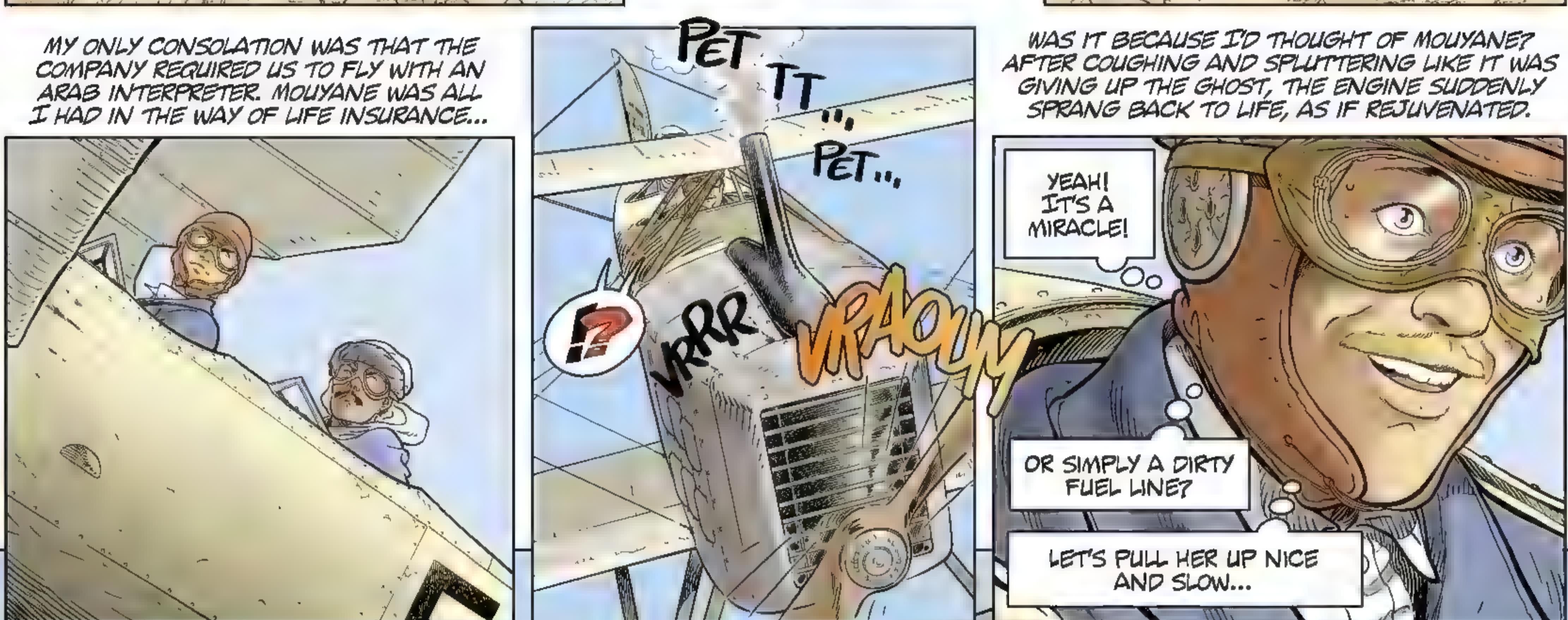
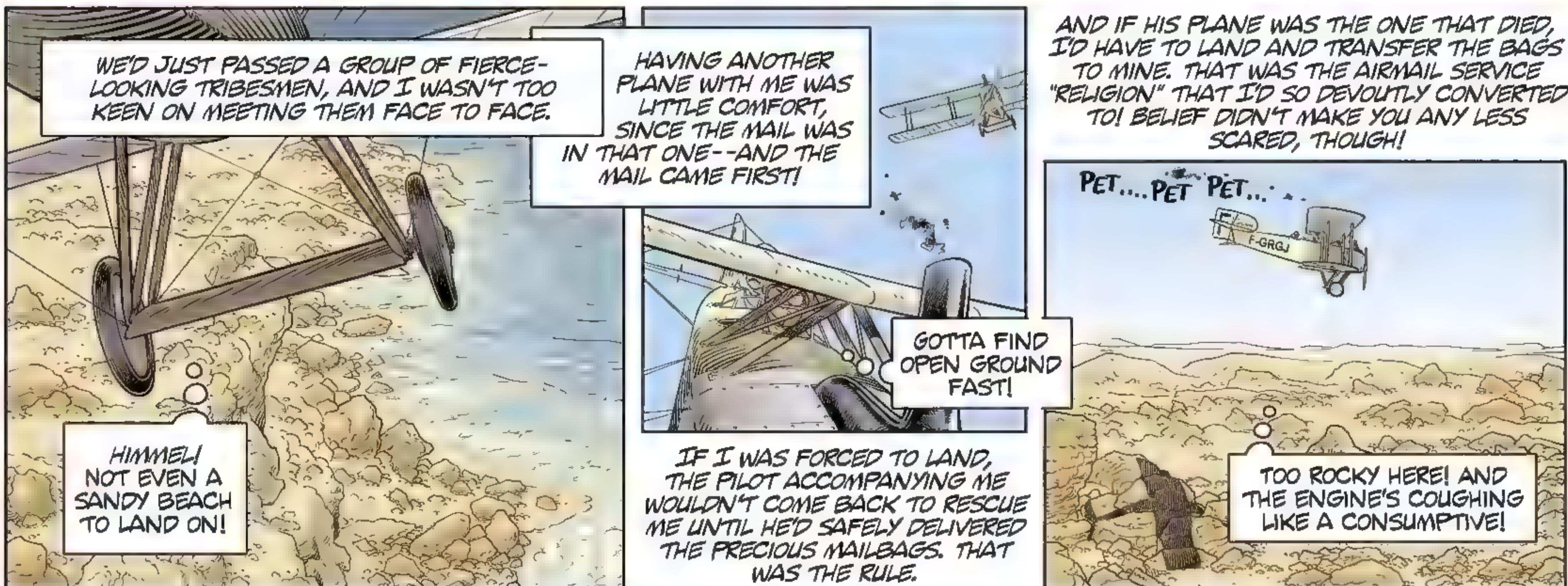
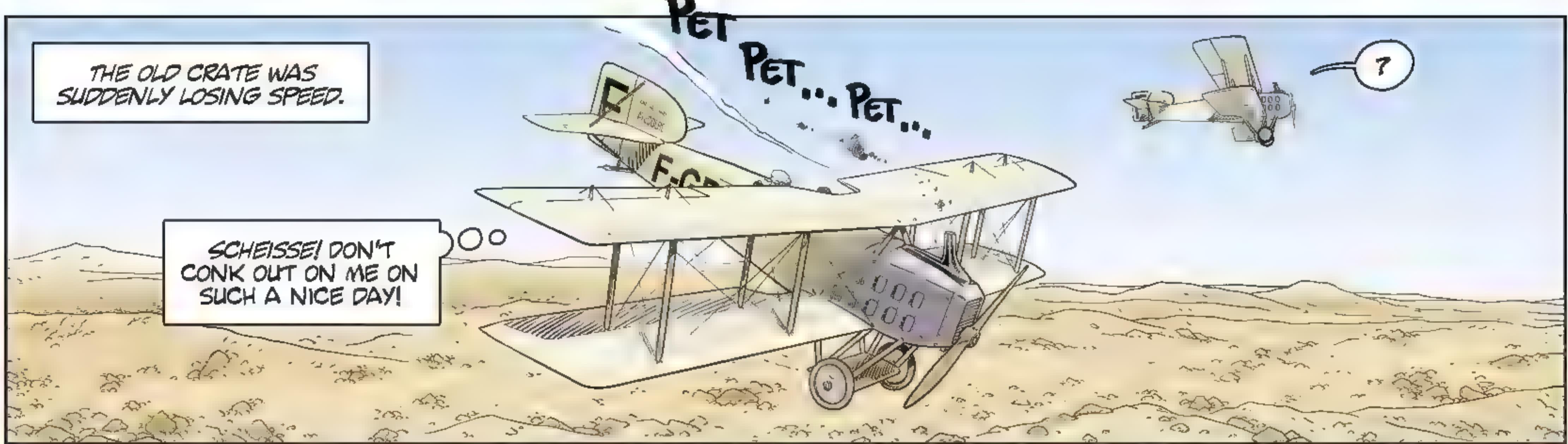
...AN ALMOST MORBID FASCINATION WITH THIS VAST EMPTINESS, ALLIED TO THE RAW FEAR OF FLYING OVER A LAND FILLED WITH DANGER IN AN UNPREDICTABLE METAL MACHINE...

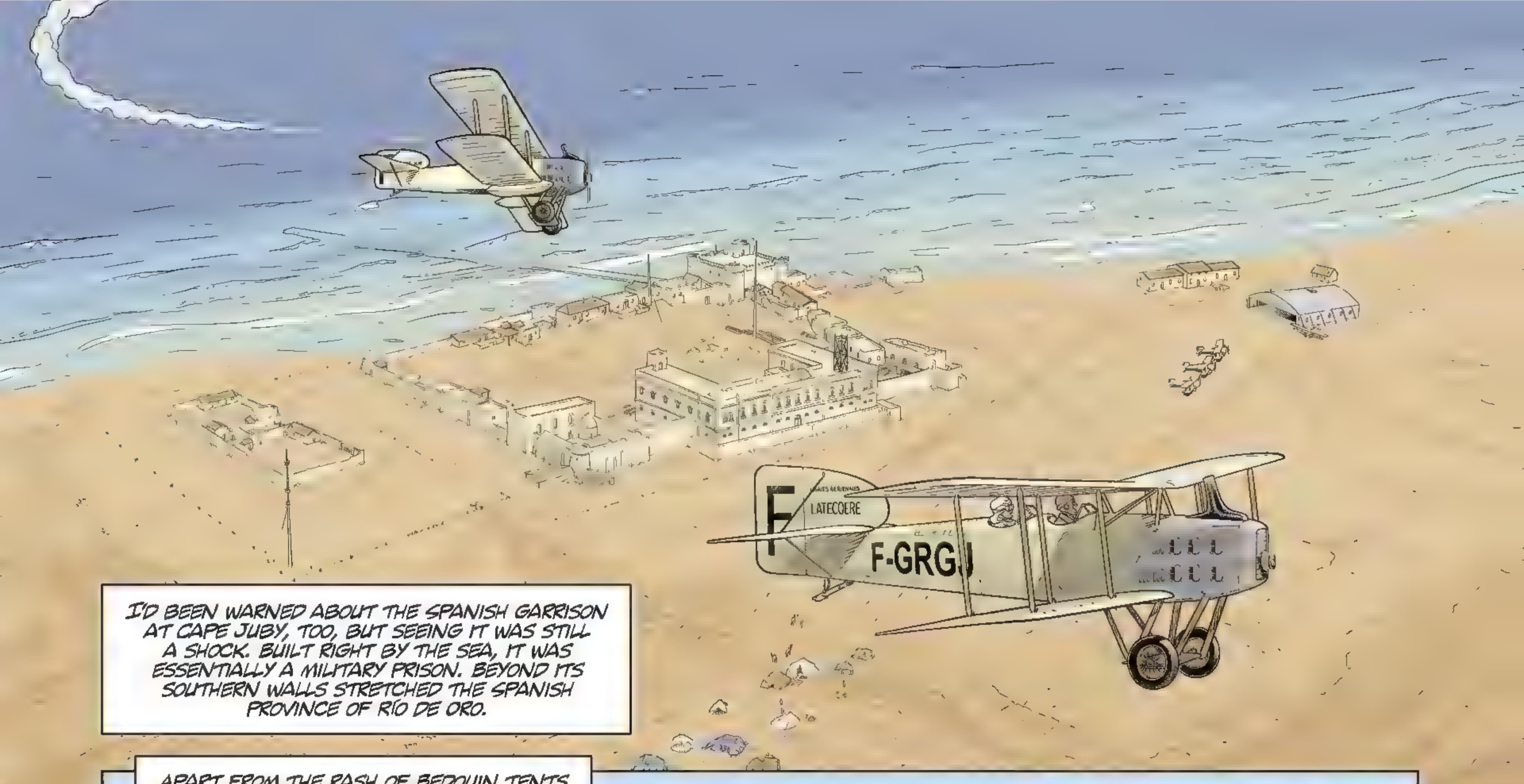


FOLLOWING THE COASTLINE THAT STRETCHED FOR HUNDREDS OF MILES TOWARD MY DESTINATION, CAPE JUBY, THE HOURS OF FLIGHT FINALLY CALMED MY FEARS, LEAVING ME IN A MEDITATIVE STATE, A KIND OF POETIC DREAMWORLD.

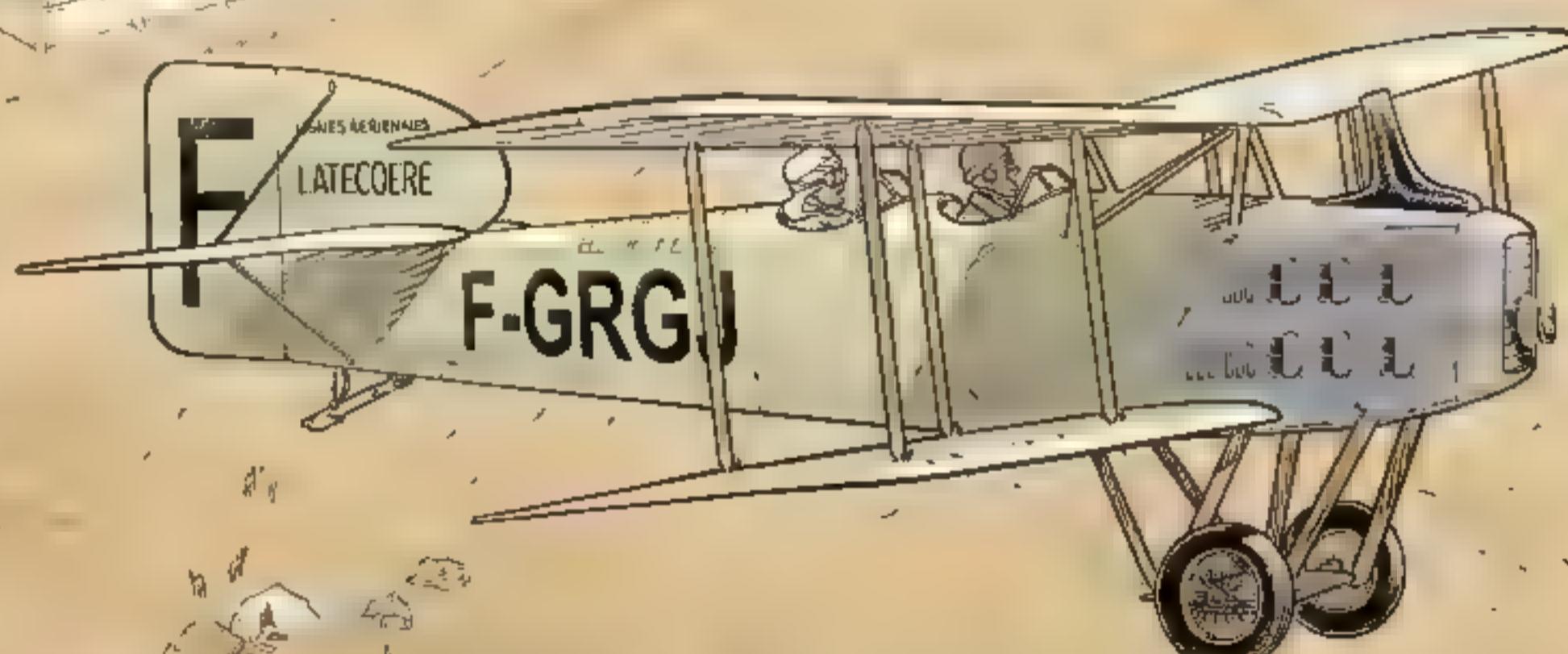


IT WAS THE ENGINE'S DISTURBING SPLUTTERING THAT BROUGHT ME BACK TO REALITY, REMINDING ME THAT HERE IN AFRICA WE HAD TO CONTEND WITH THE SAME BEAT-UP OLD BREGUETS THAT WE'D HAD IN SPAIN.

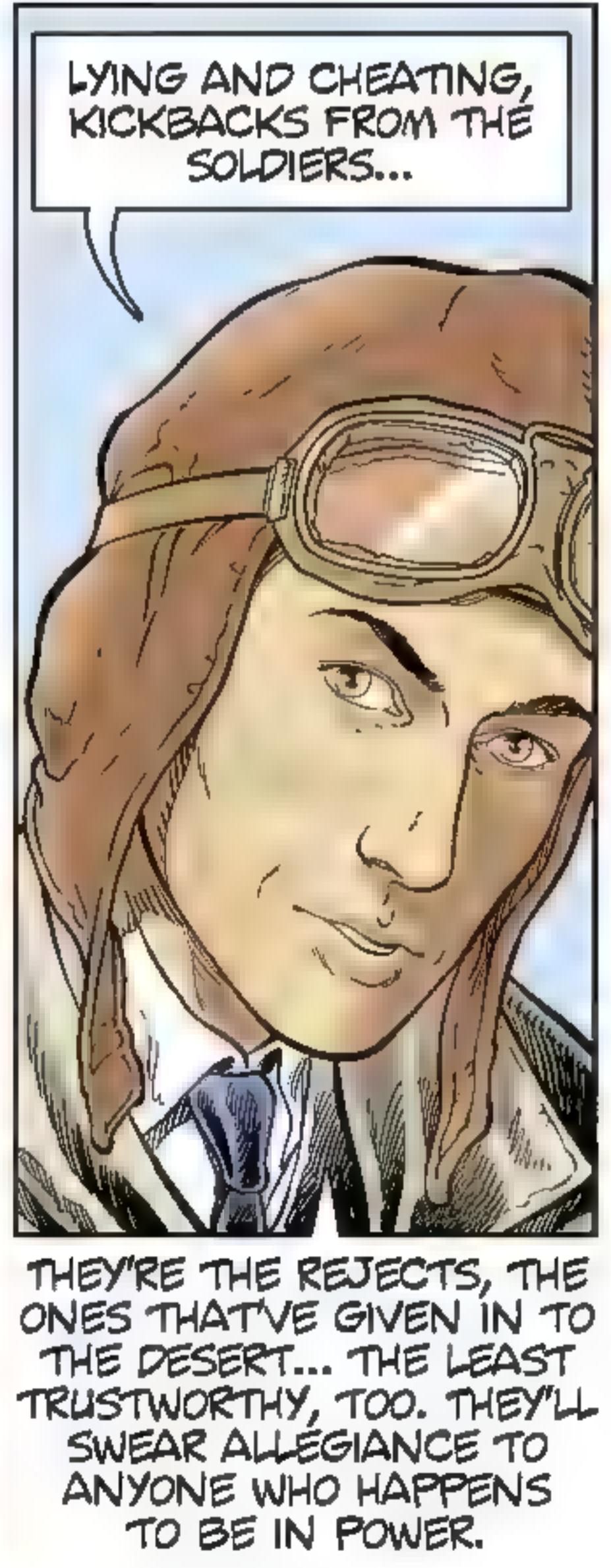
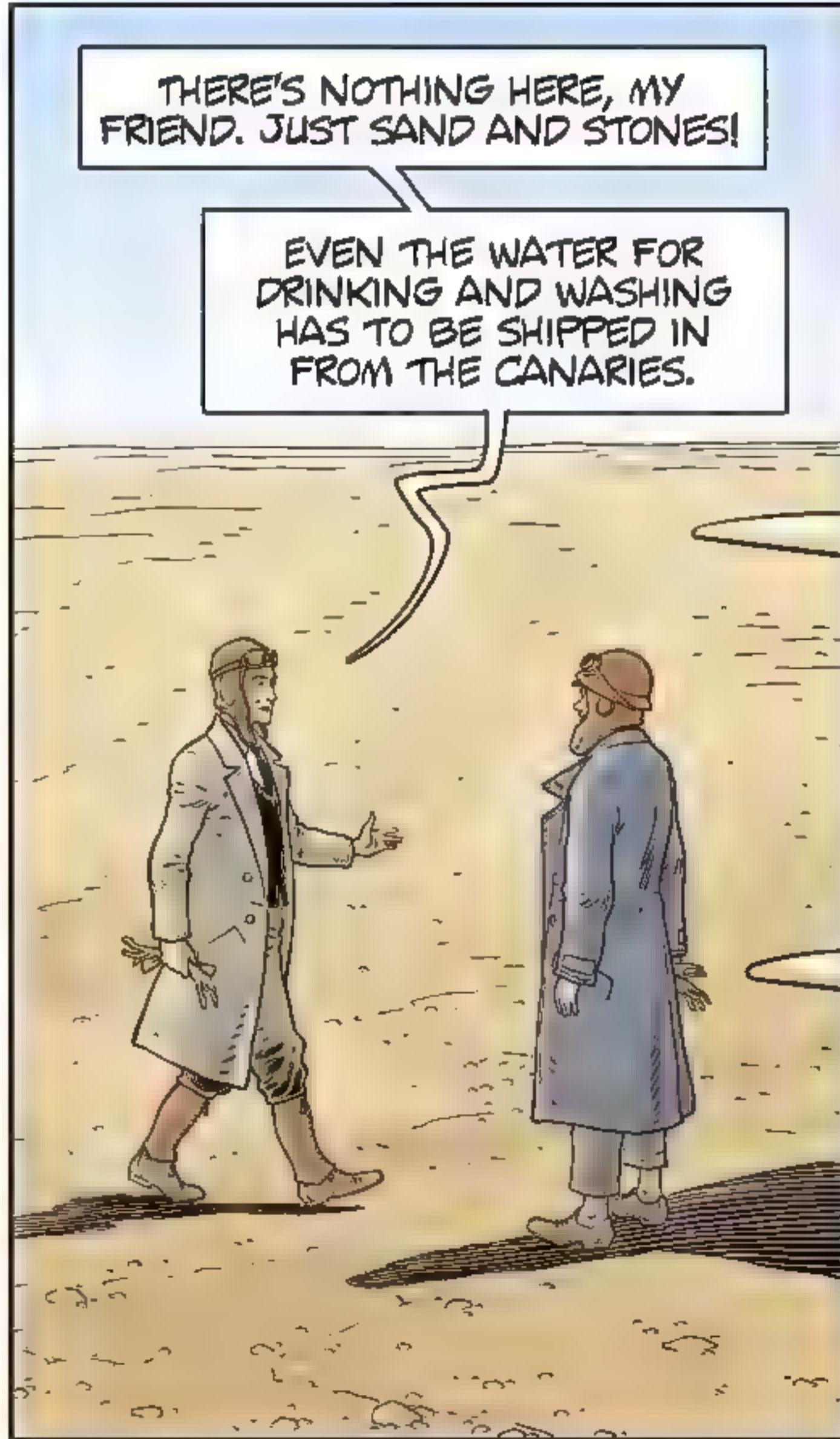
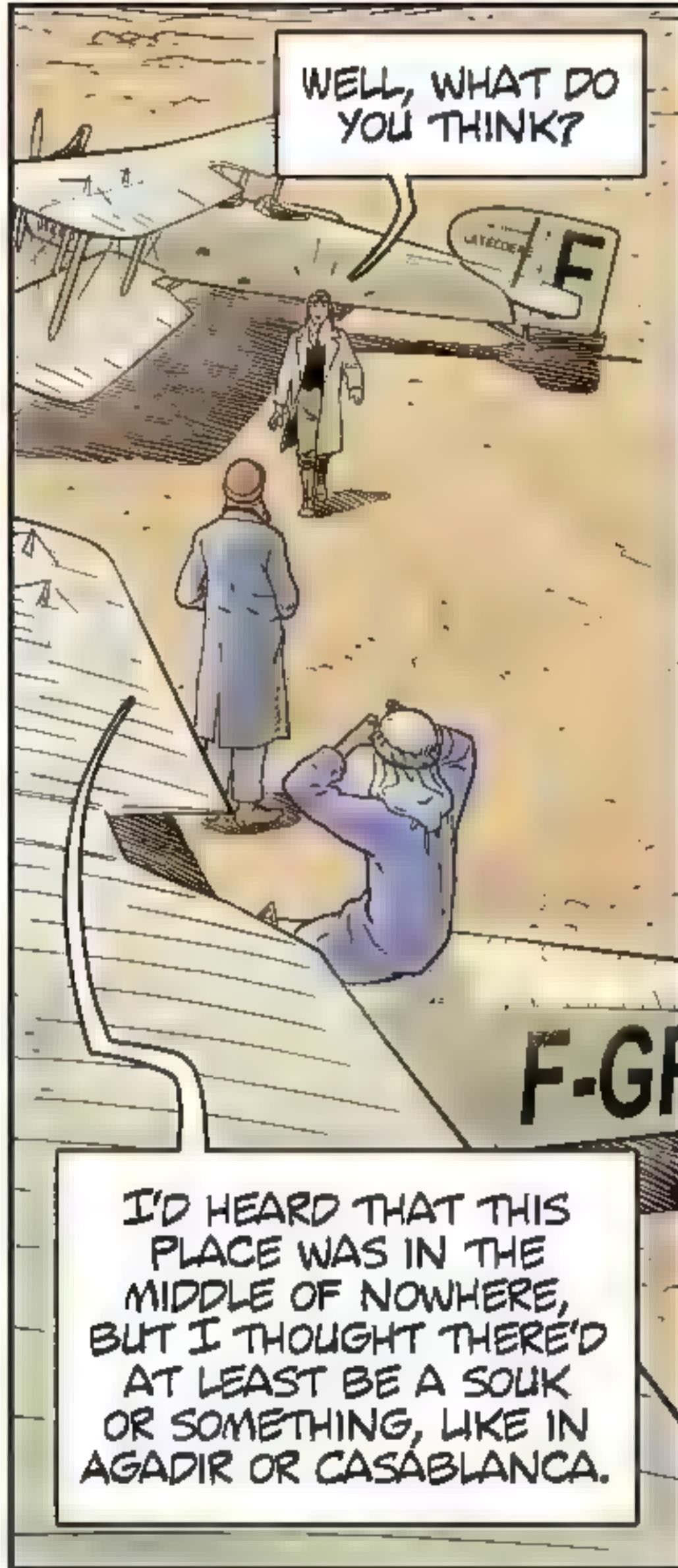


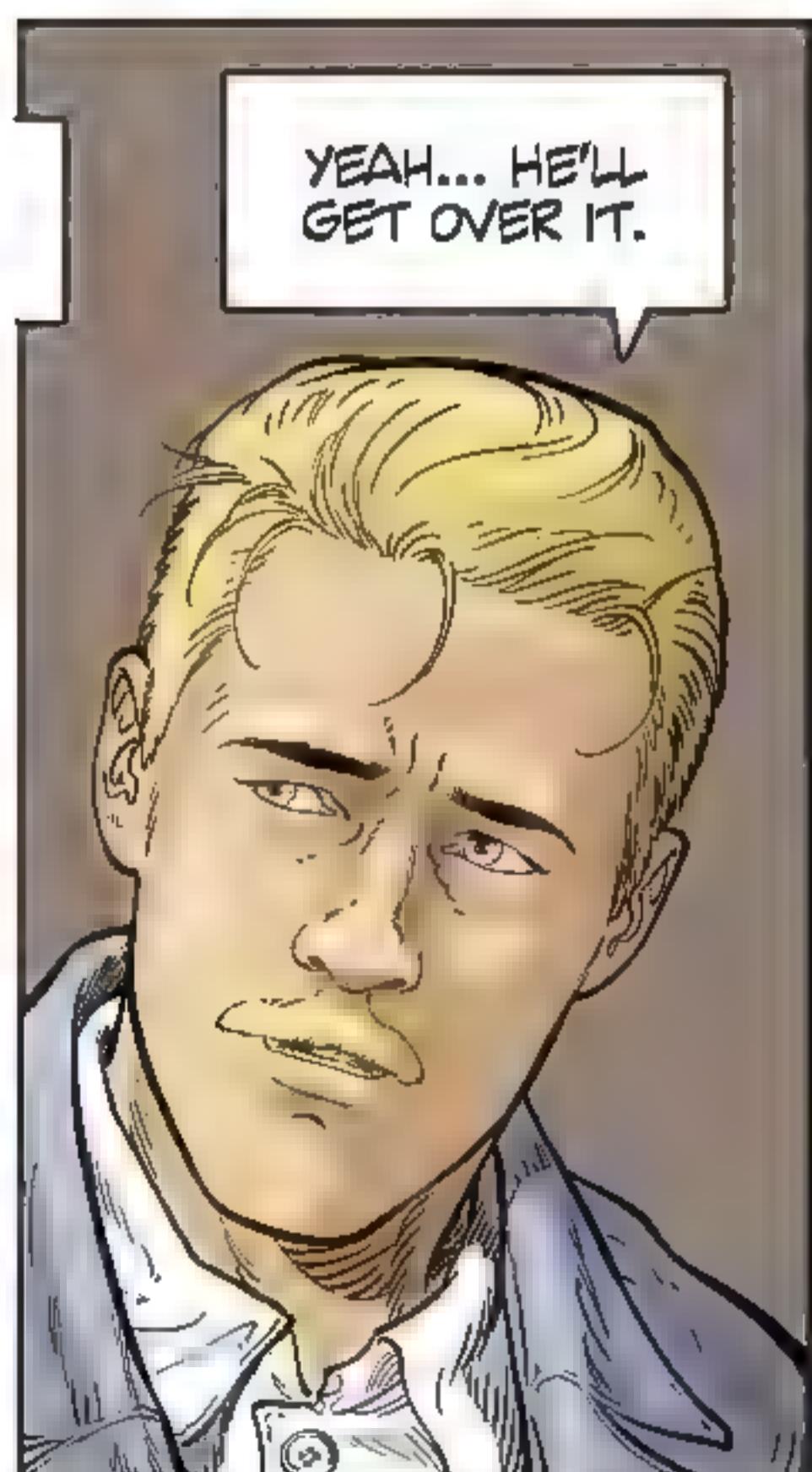
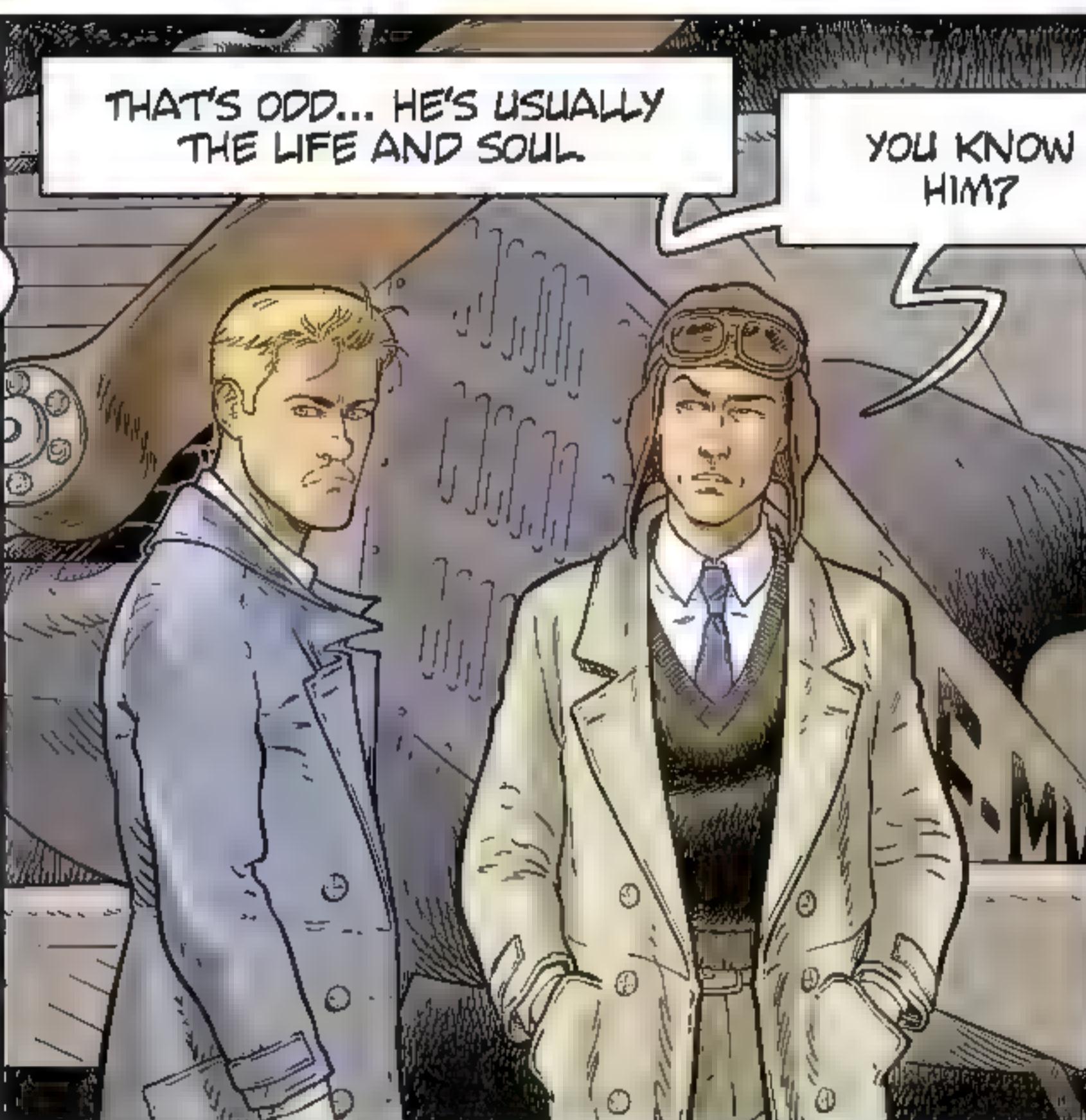
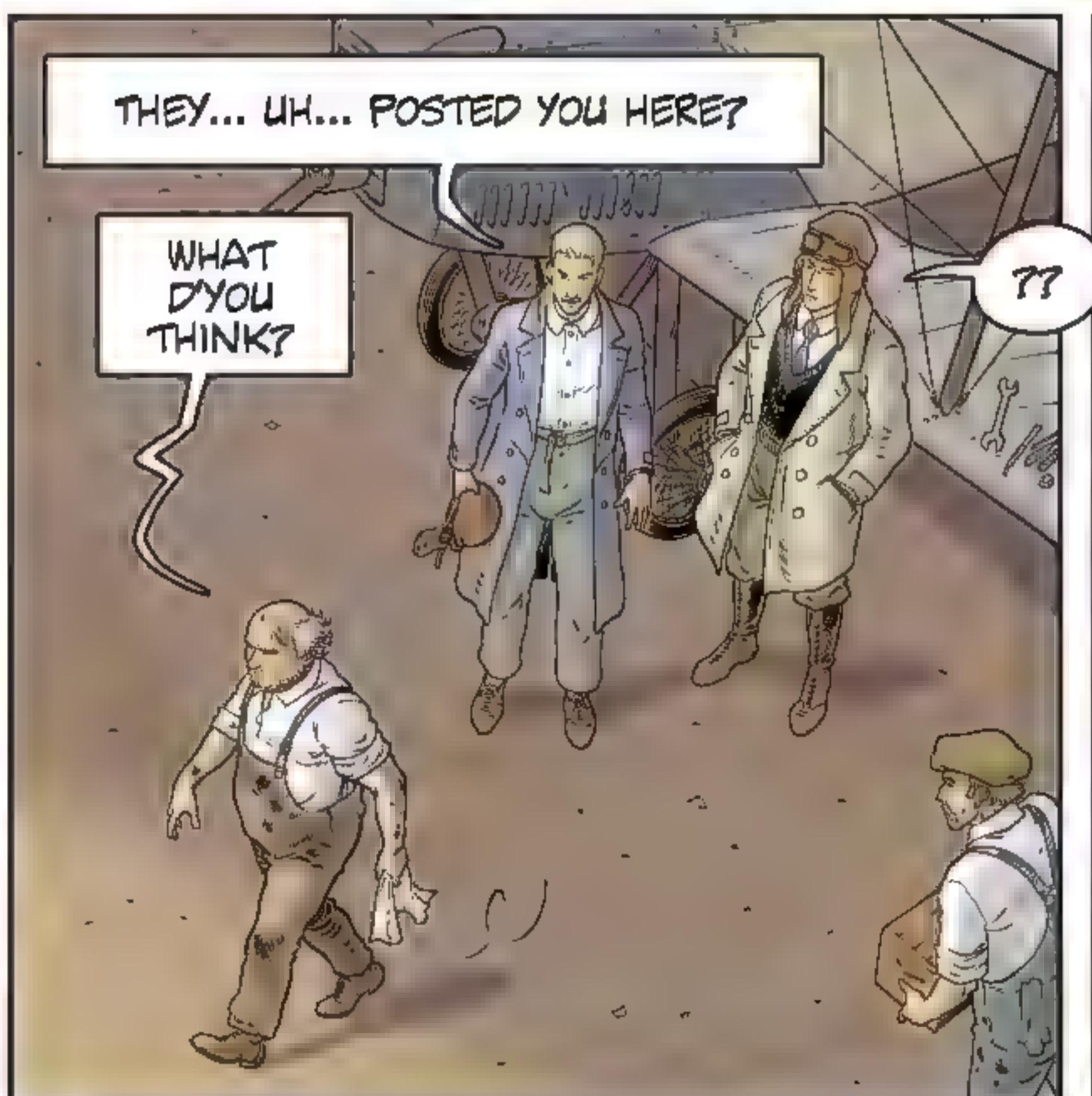
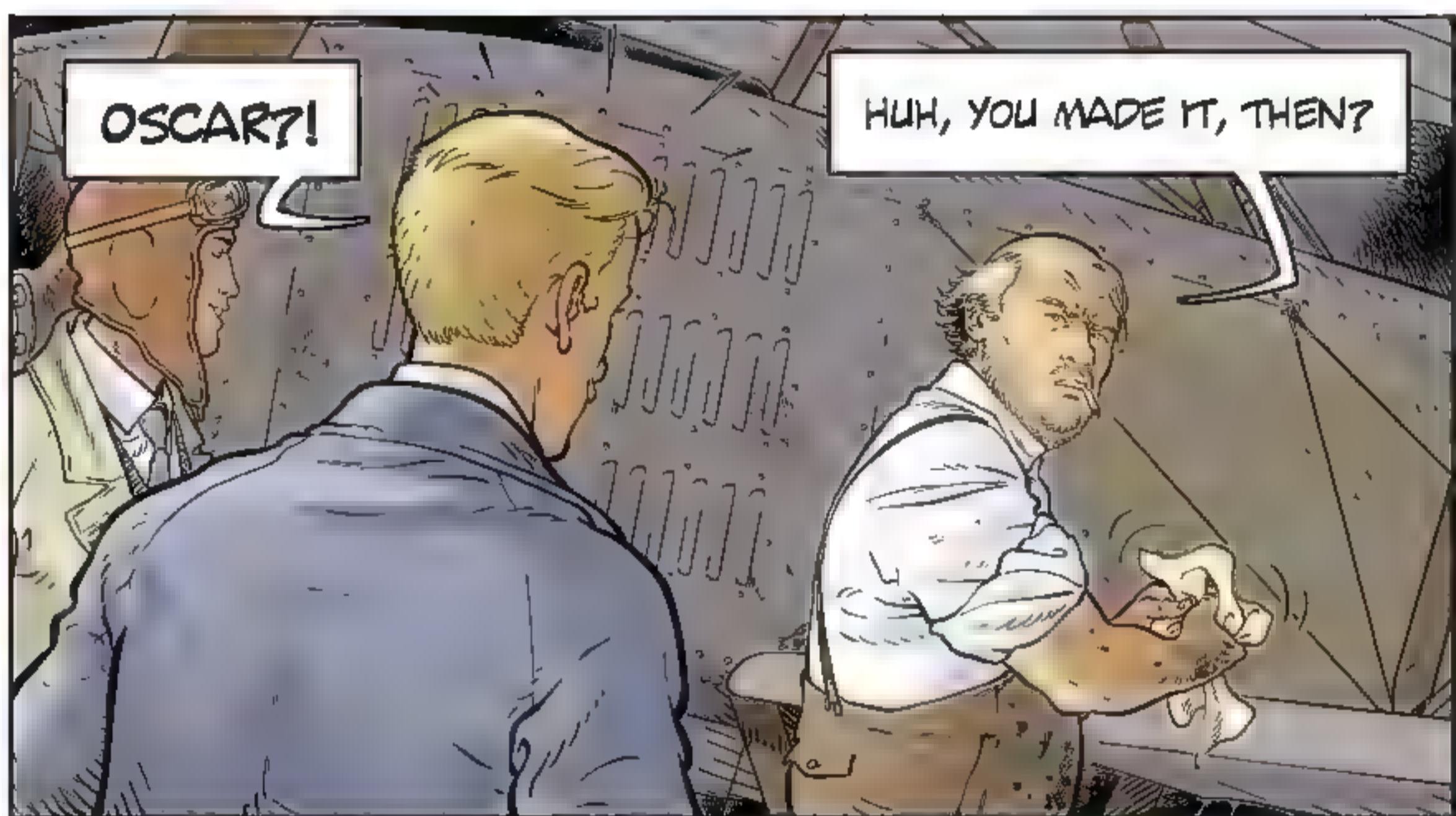
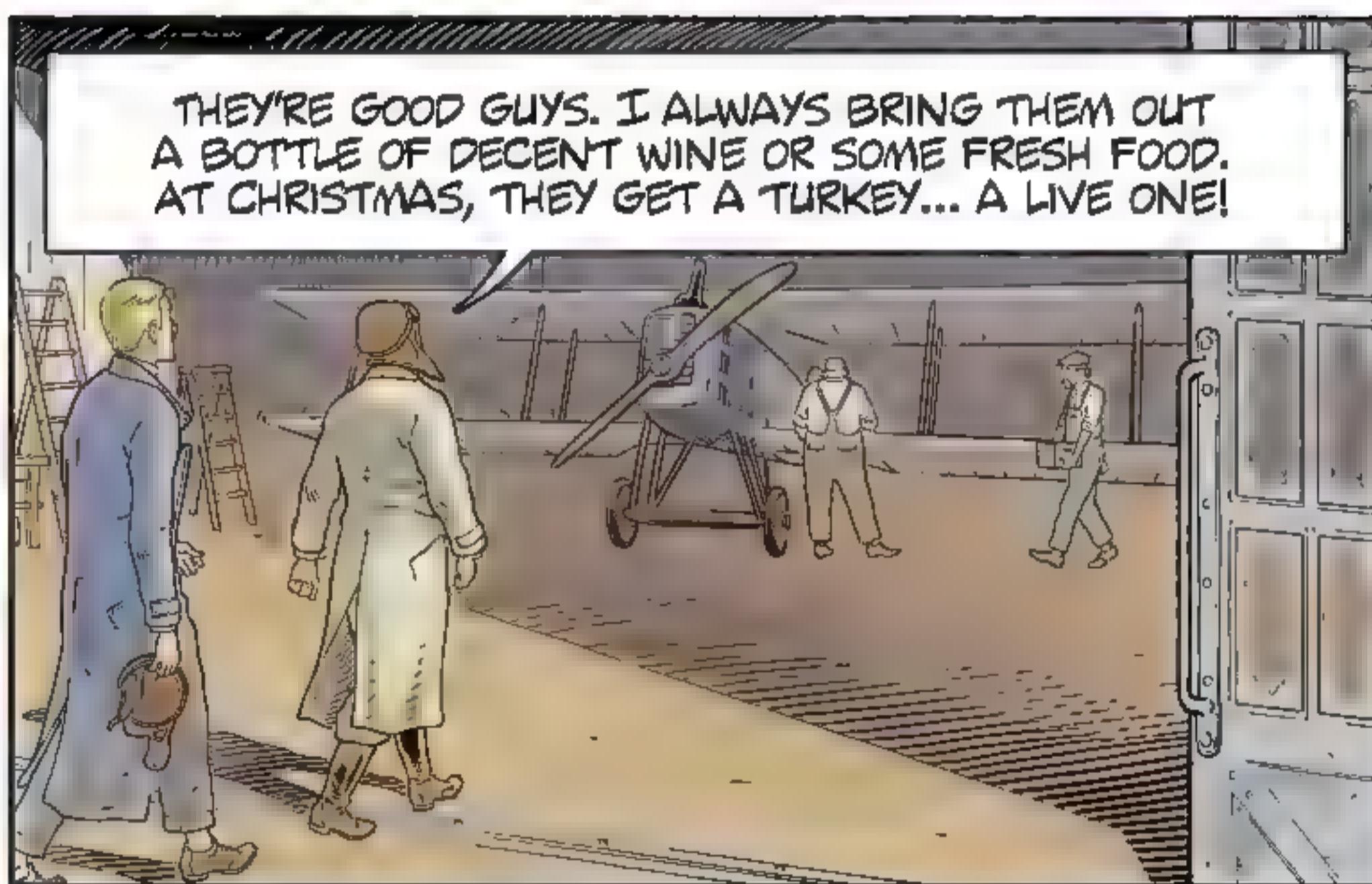
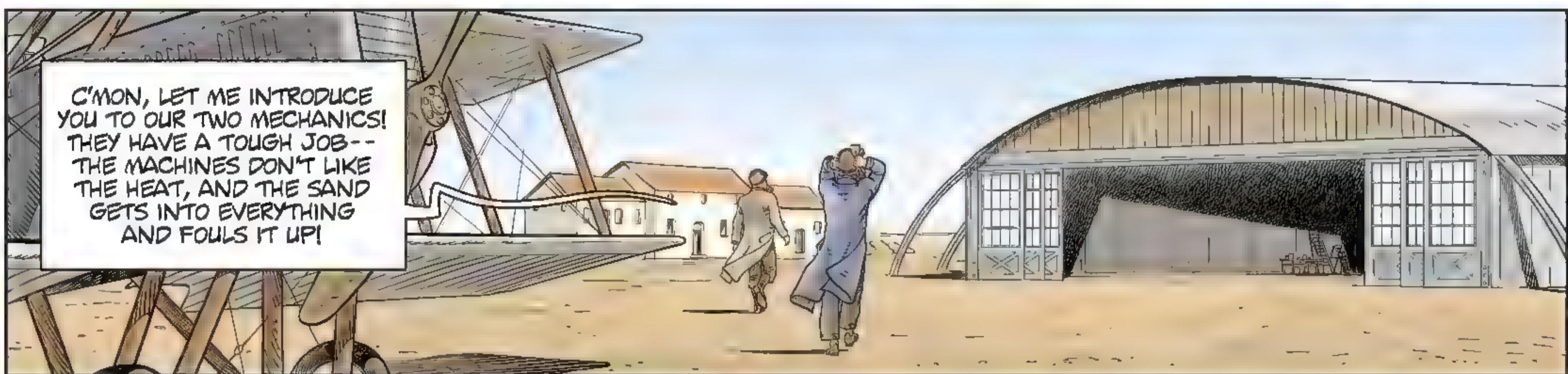
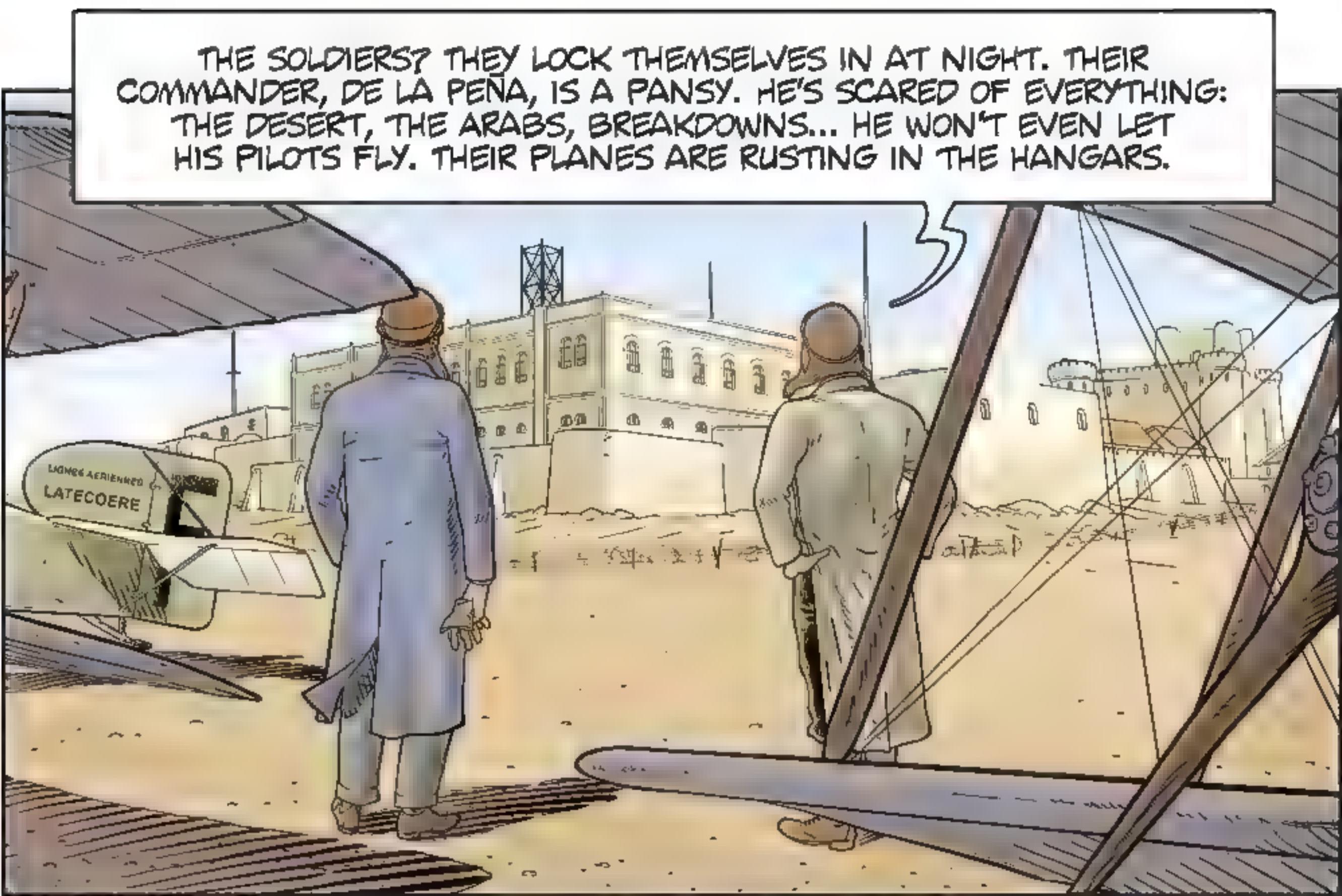


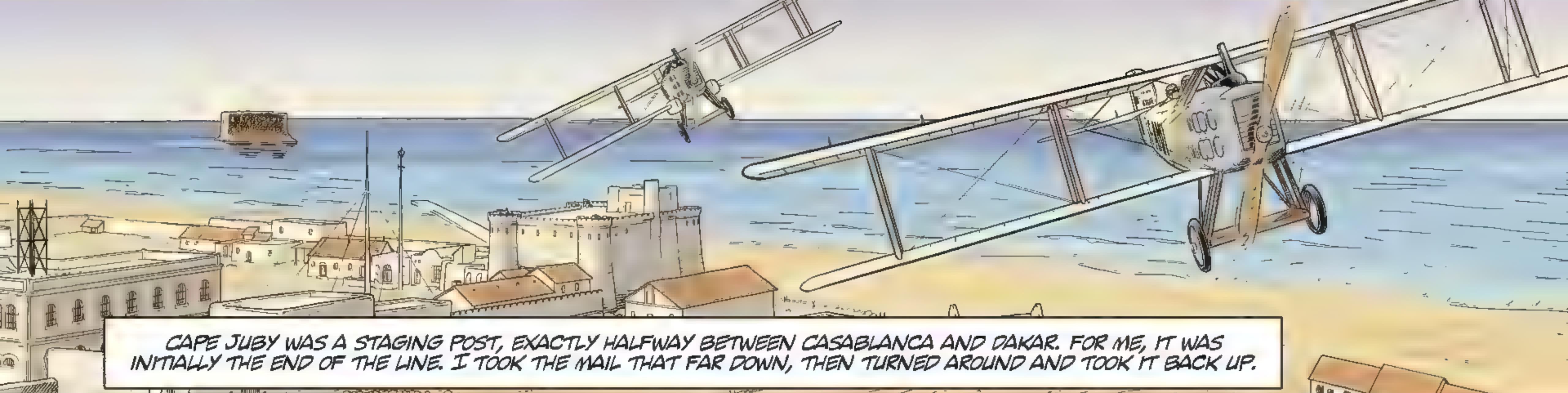
I'D BEEN WARNED ABOUT THE SPANISH GARRISON AT CAPE JUBY, TOO, BUT SEEING IT WAS STILL A SHOCK. BUILT RIGHT BY THE SEA, IT WAS ESSENTIALLY A MILITARY PRISON. BEYOND ITS SOUTHERN WALLS STRETCHED THE SPANISH PROVINCE OF RIO DE ORO.



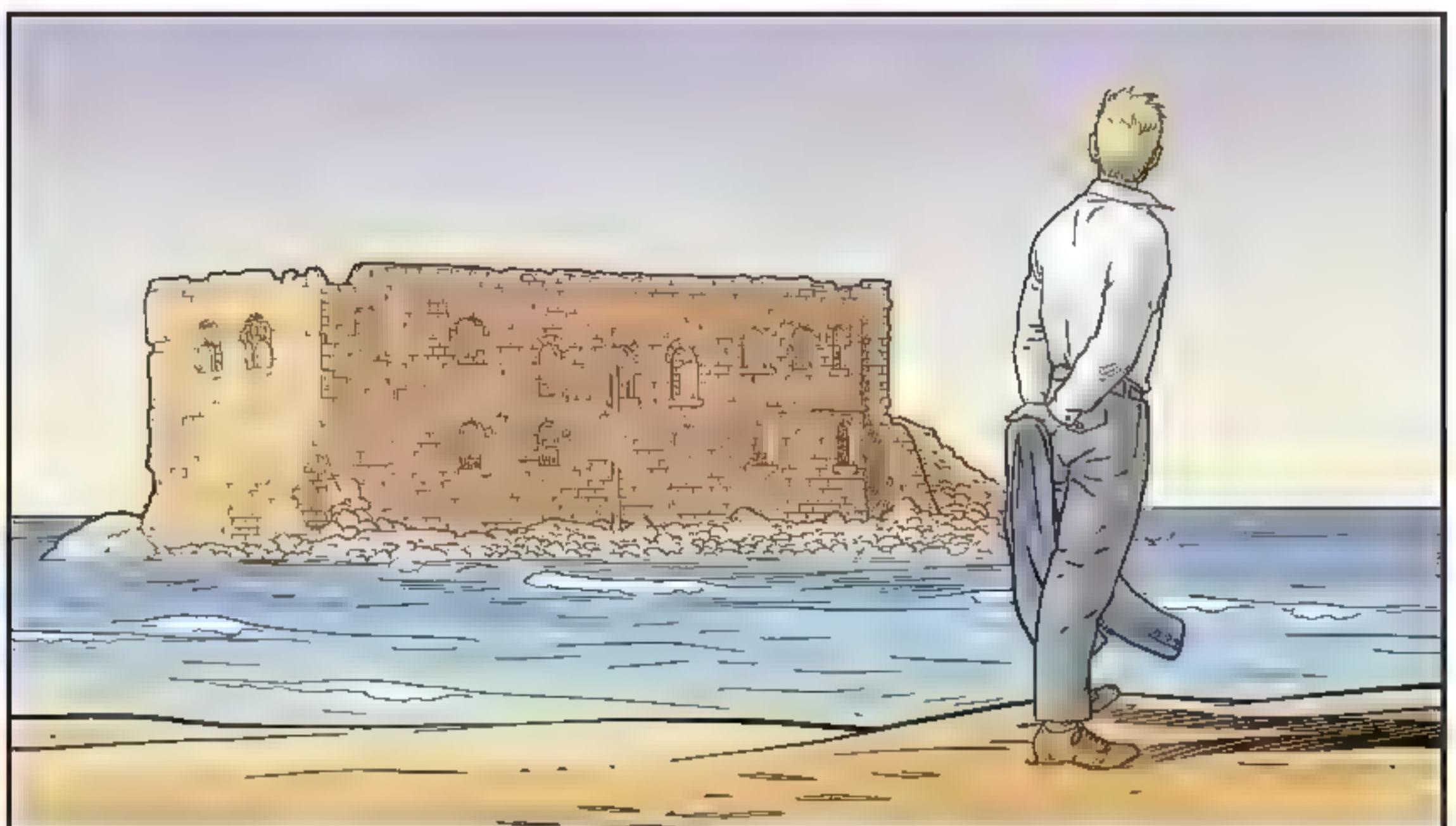
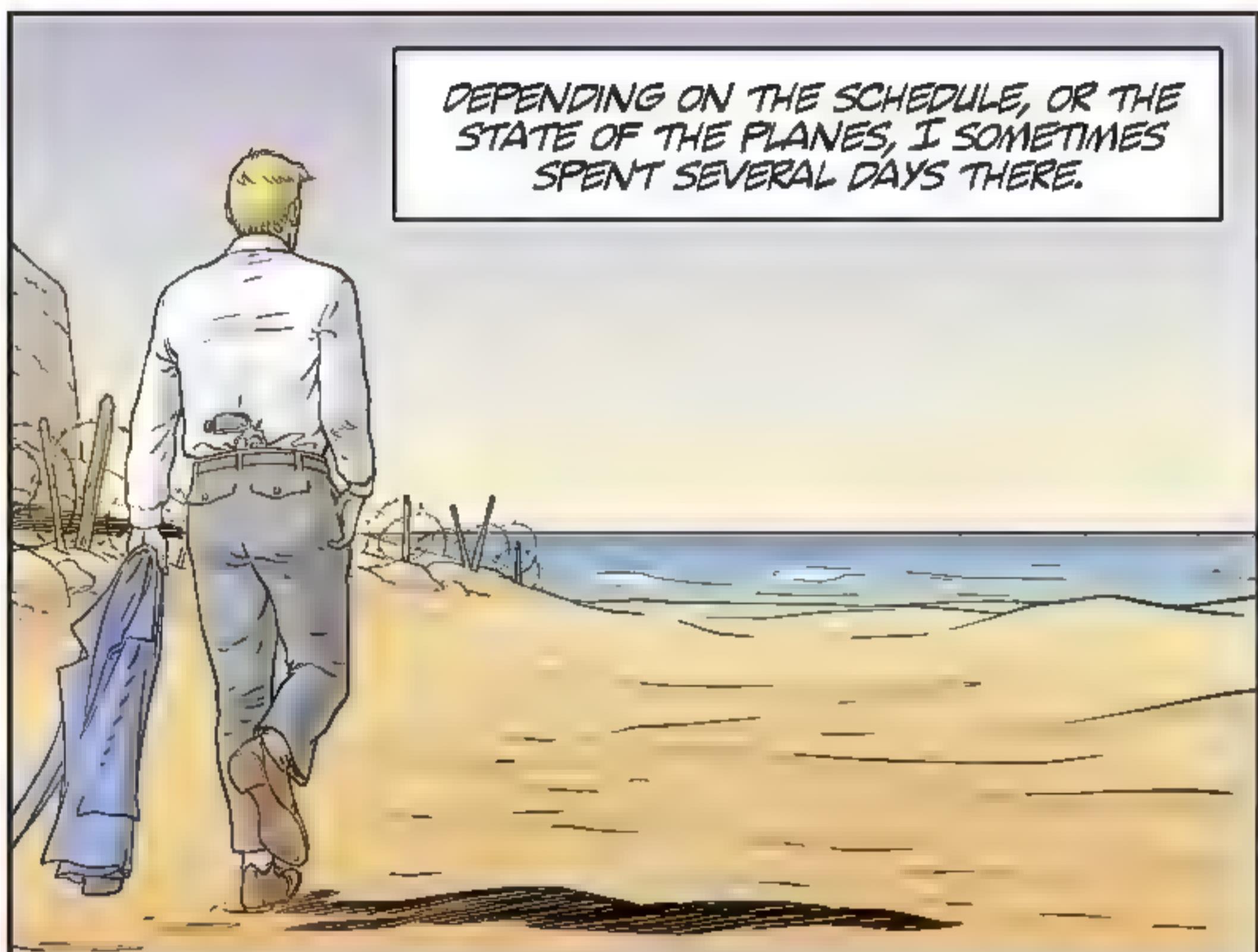
APART FROM THE RASH OF BEDOUIN TENTS THAT SEEMED TO HAVE SPRUNG FROM THE DUST OUTSIDE THE FORT, THE AREA WAS DESERTED AND GRIMLY SILENT.



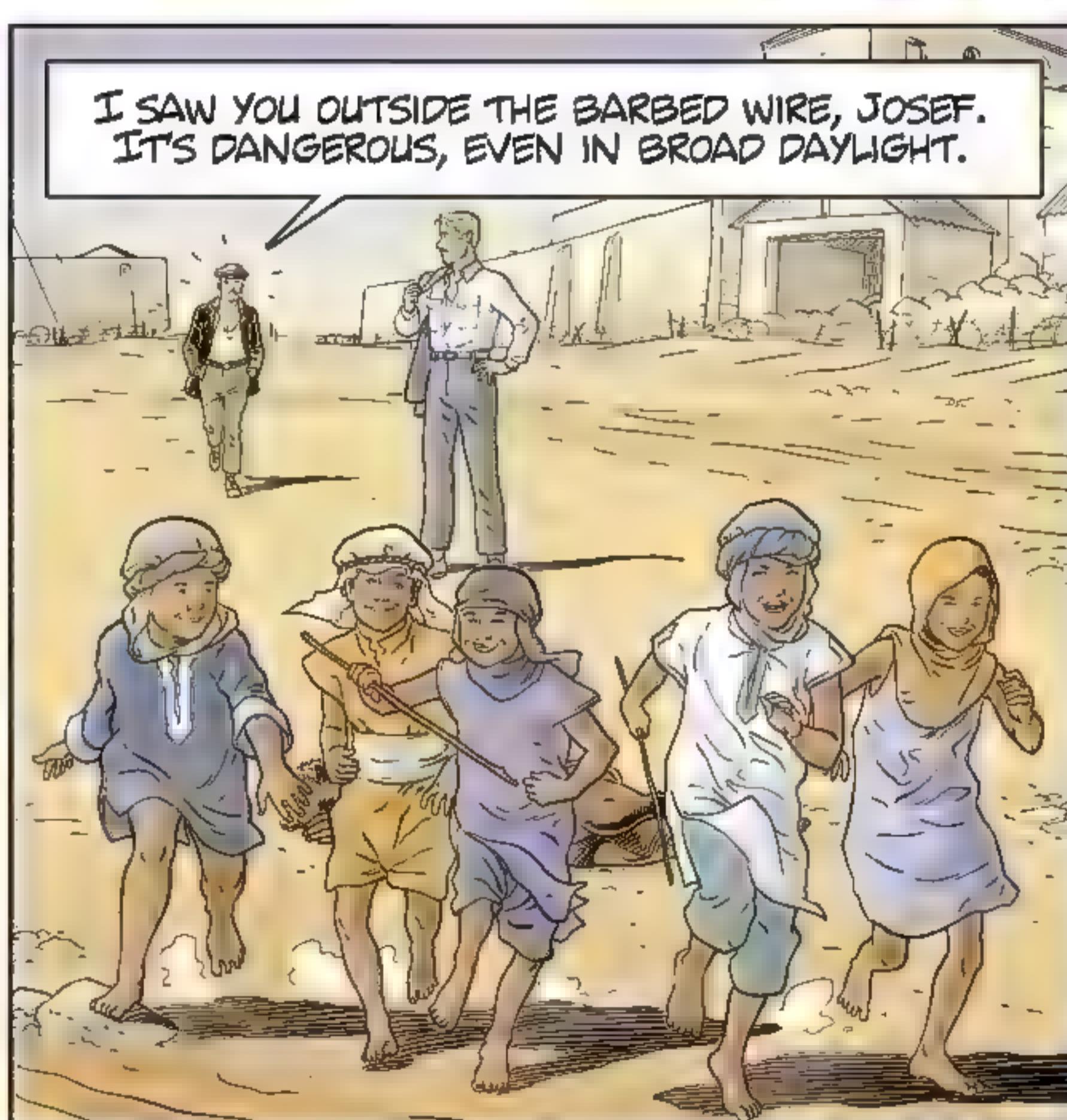
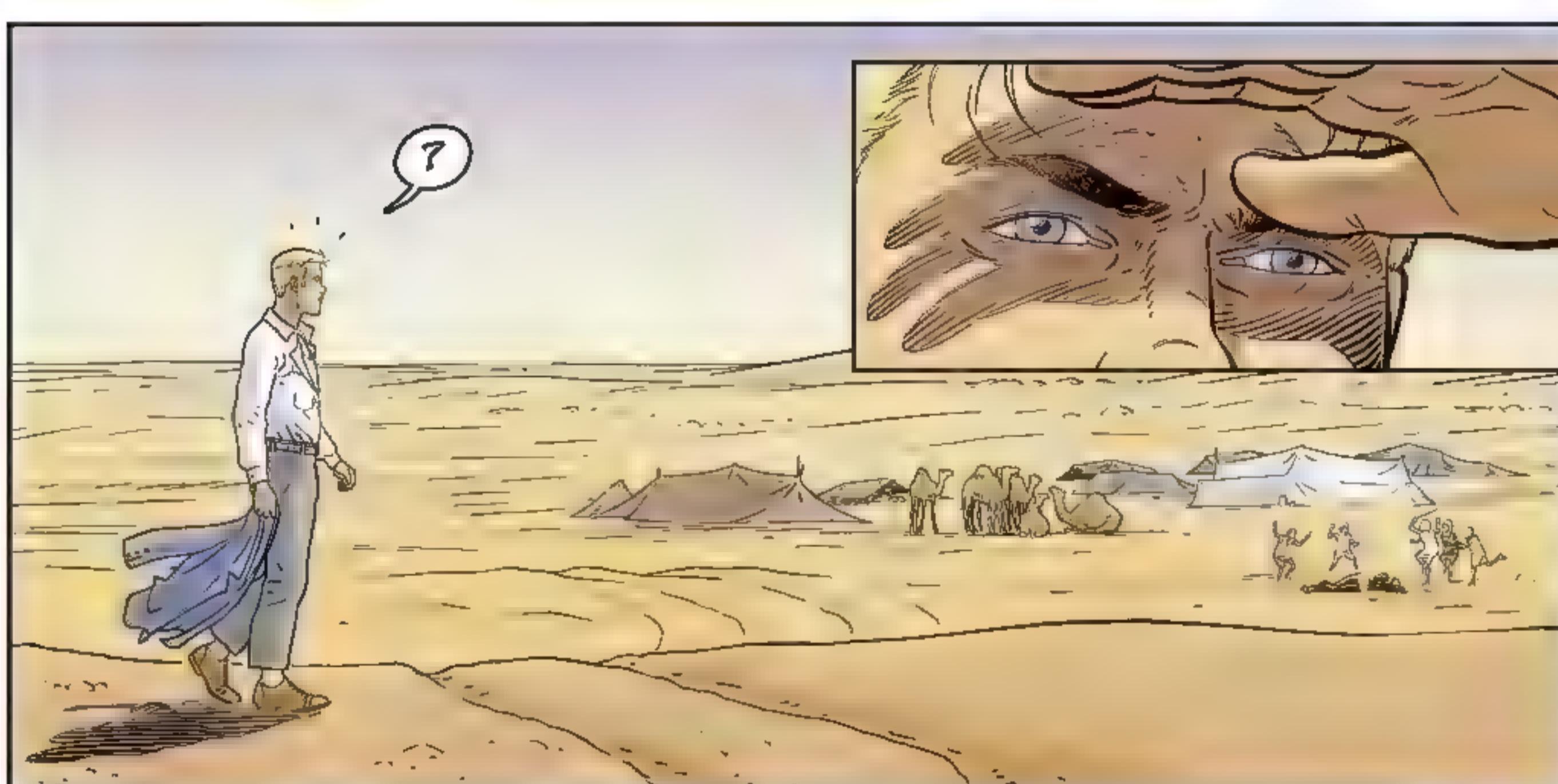


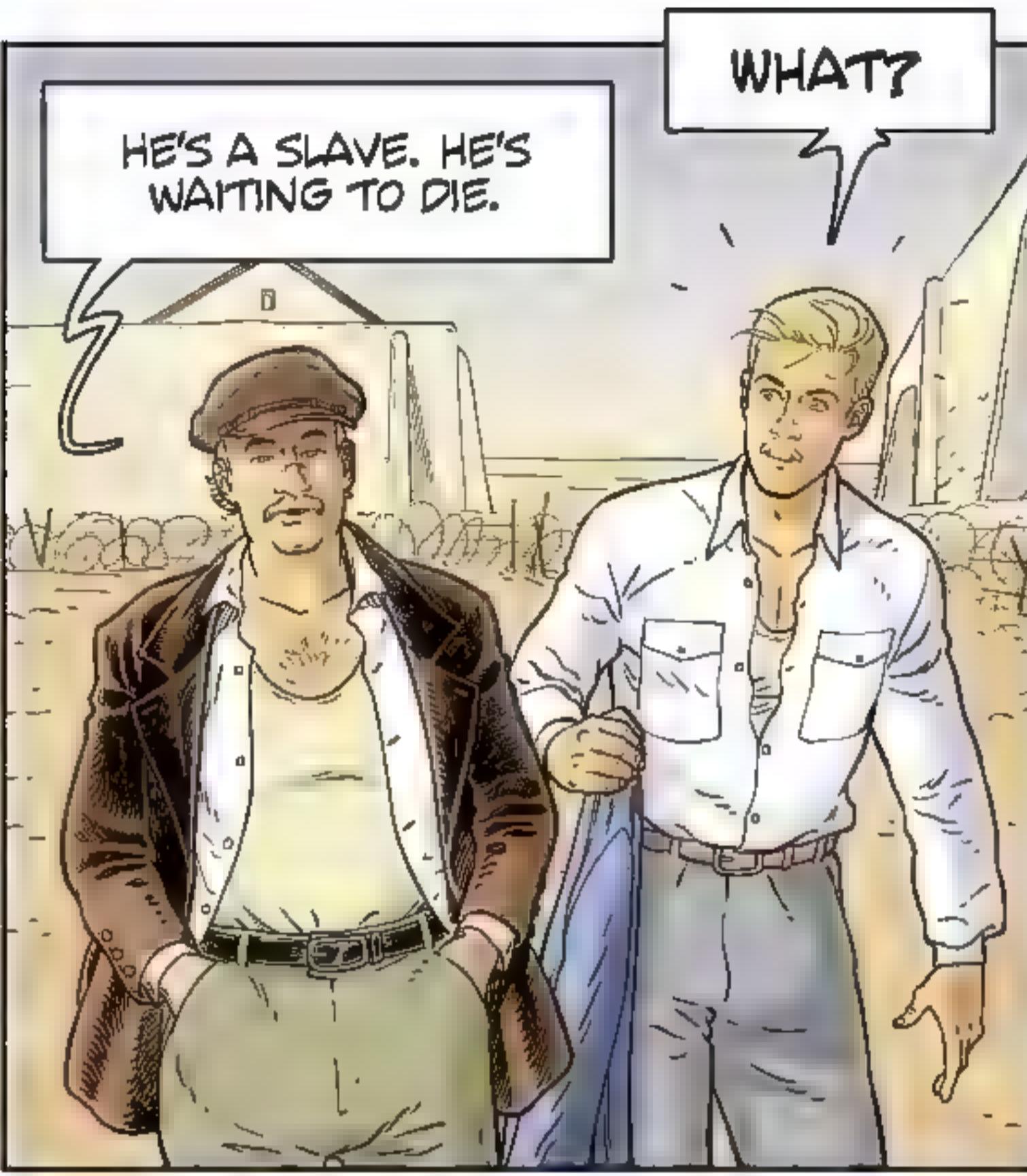
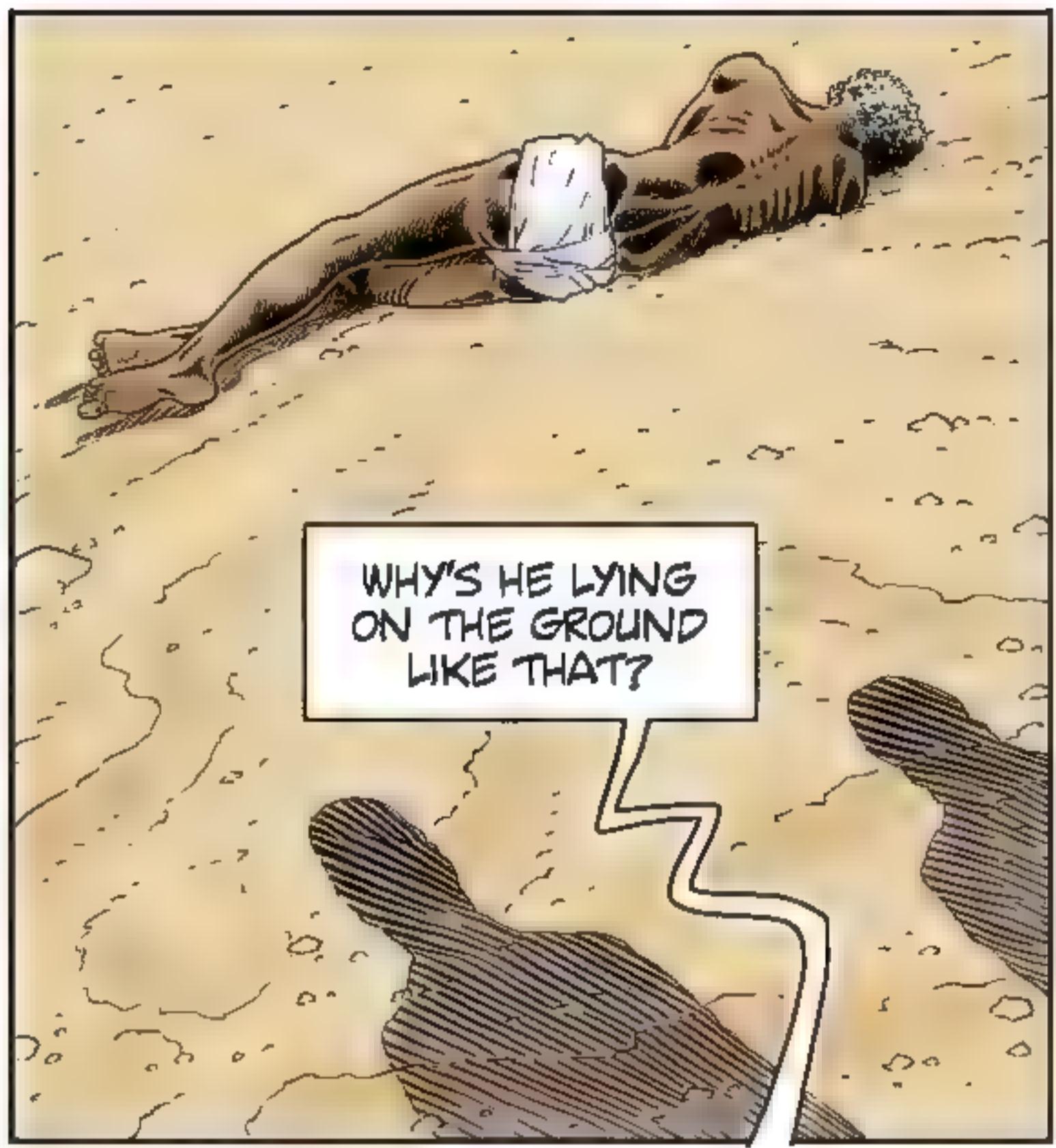


CAPE JUBY WAS A STAGING POST, EXACTLY HALFWAY BETWEEN CASABLANCA AND DAKAR. FOR ME, IT WAS INITIALLY THE END OF THE LINE. I TOOK THE MAIL THAT FAR DOWN, THEN TURNED AROUND AND TOOK IT BACK UP.

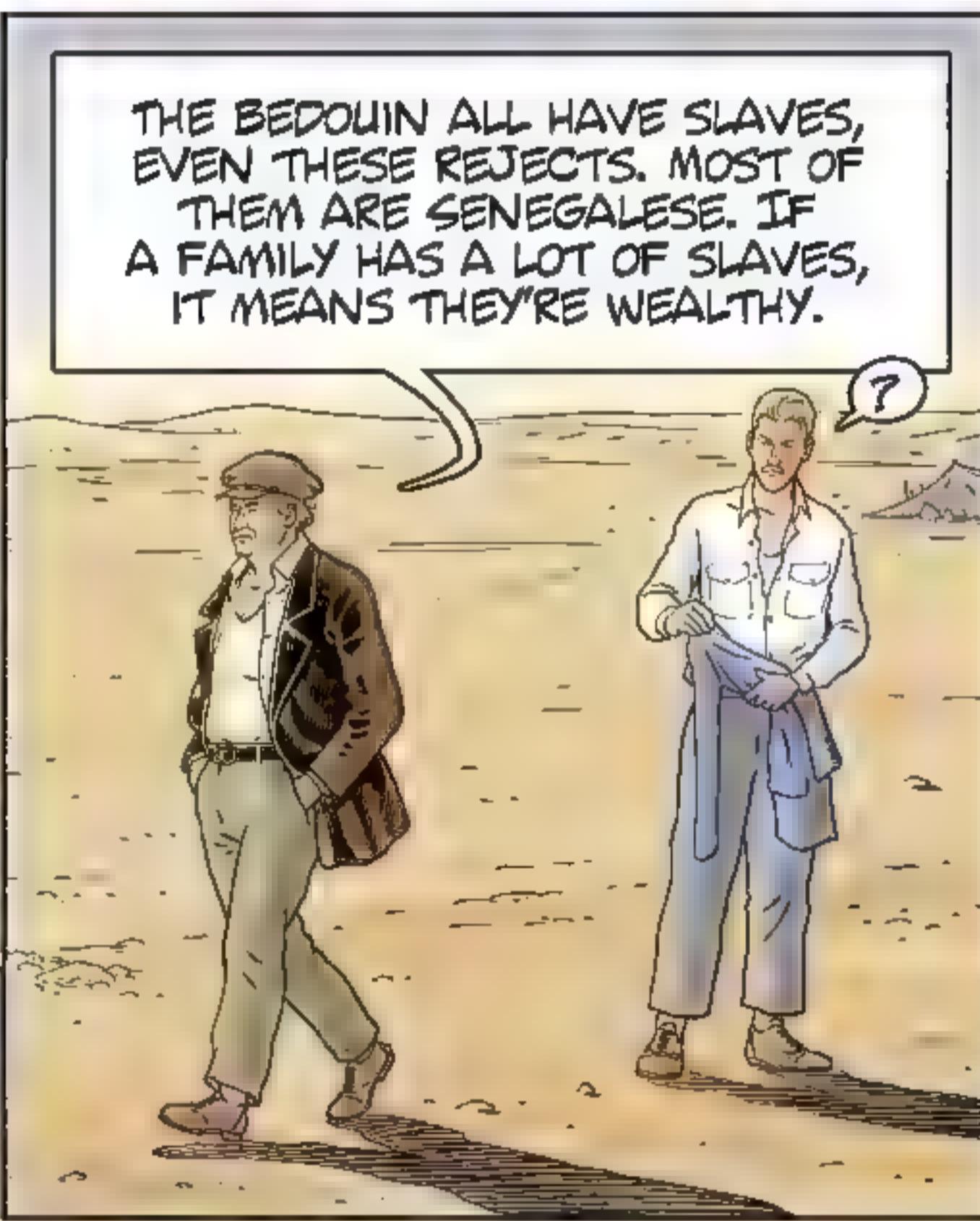
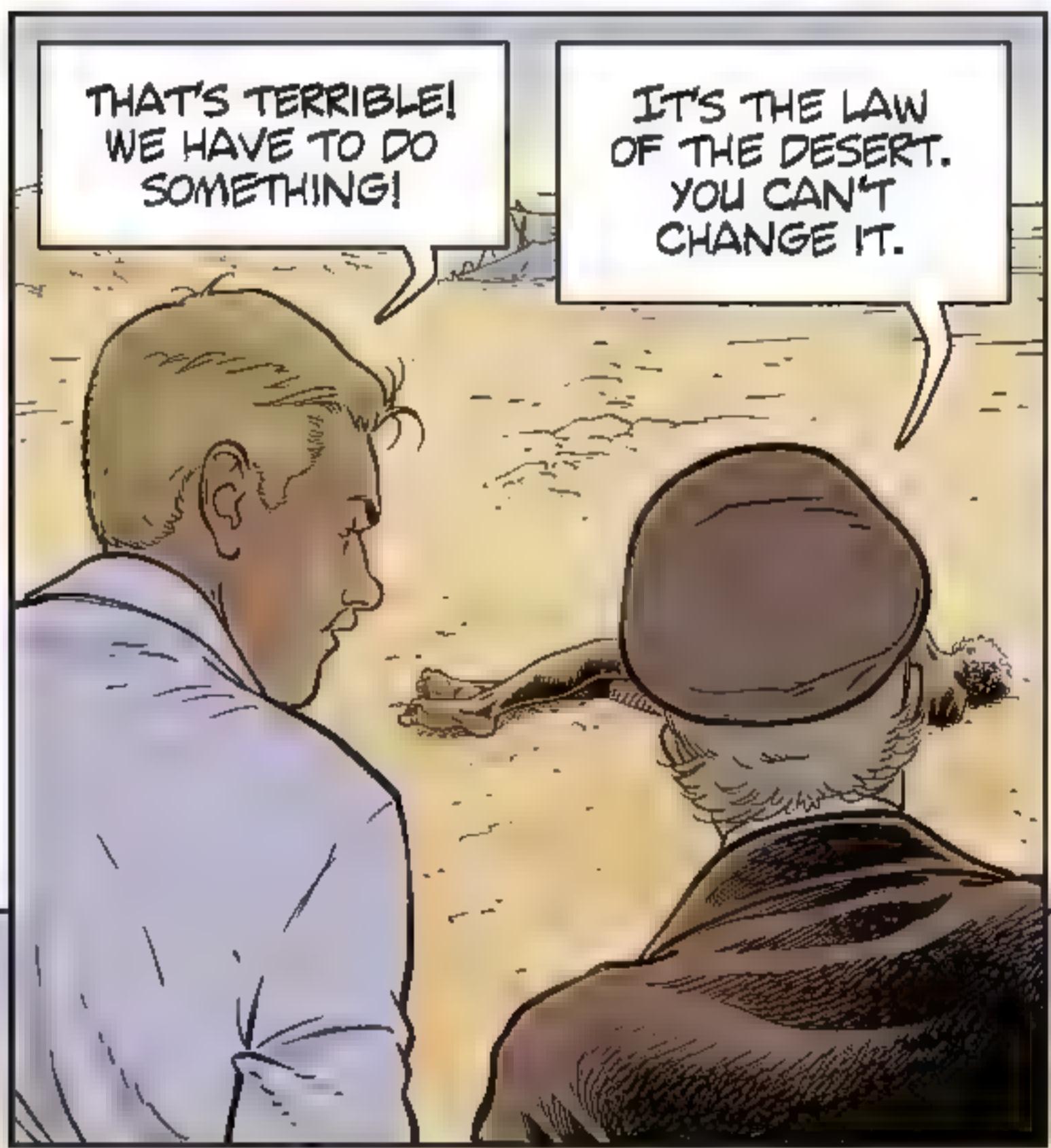


UNLIKE CASABLANCA, WHERE THERE WAS PLENTY TO DO, CAPE JUBY WAS THE EPITOME OF BOREDOM. WORSE, IT WAS LIKE A HUGE, SUFFOCATING VACUUM. EXCEPT FOR THE LAPING OF THE WAVES, YOU'D HAVE THOUGHT GOD HAD ABANDONED THE PLACE.

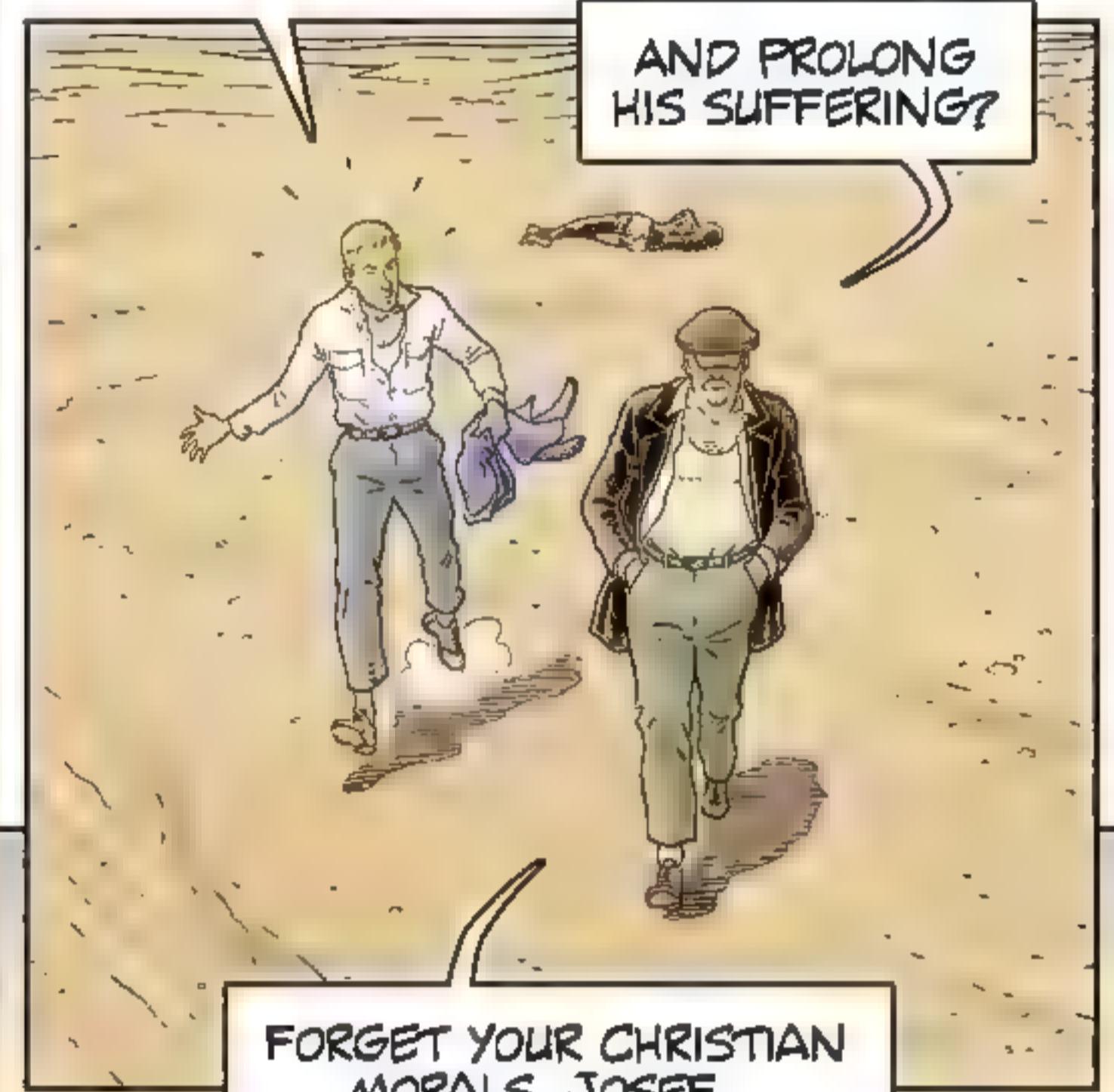




HE'S TOO OLD TO WORK, SO HE CAN'T EARN HIS FOOD OR CLOTHING ANYMORE. HE PROBABLY OFFERED HIS SERVICES TO THE OTHER FAMILIES, BUT NO ONE WOULD HAVE HIM.

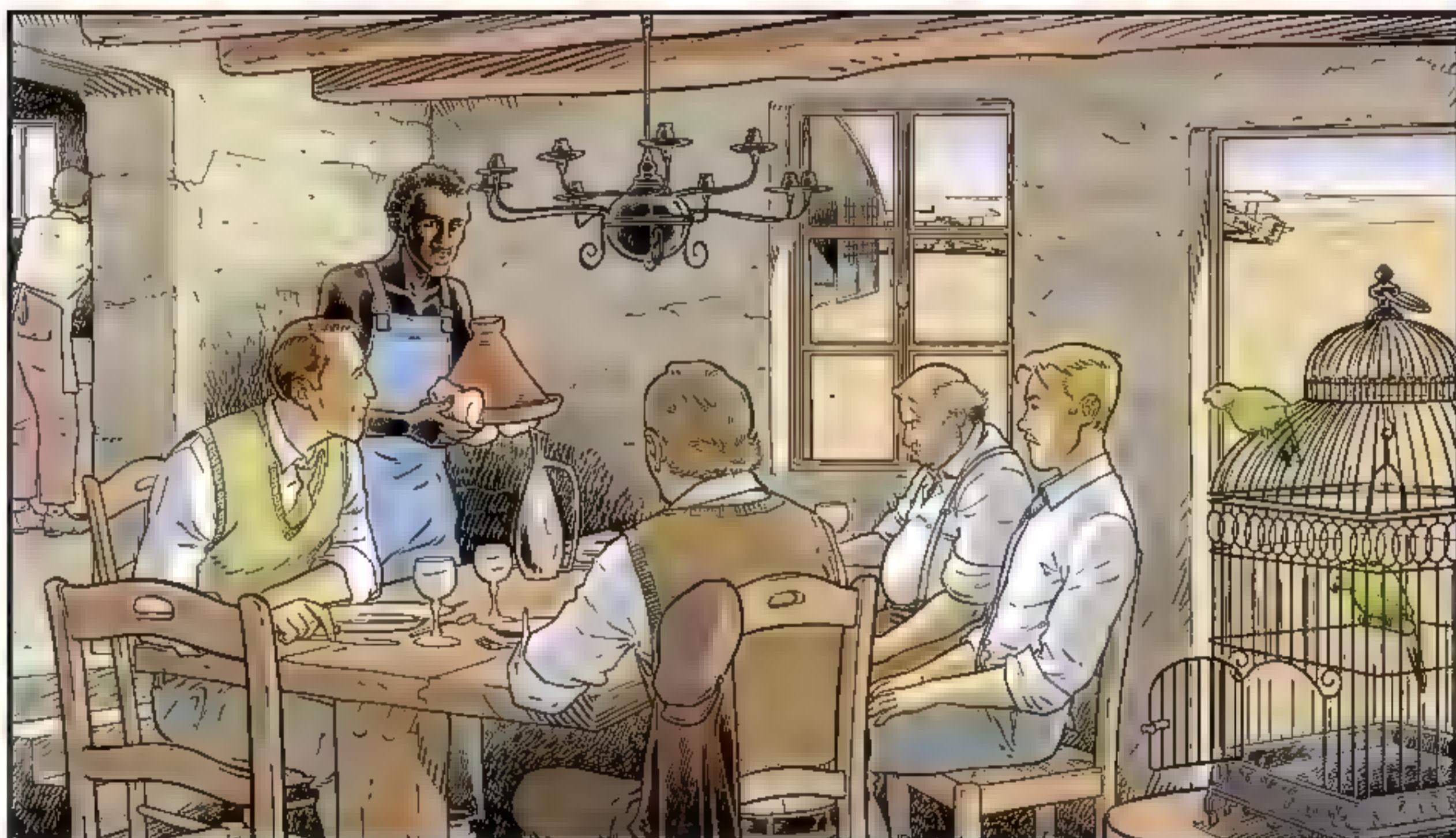


BUT WE CAN'T LEAVE A MAN OUT IN THE SUN LIKE THAT TO DIE OF THIRST! WE COULD BRING HIM SOME WATER, AT LEAST!



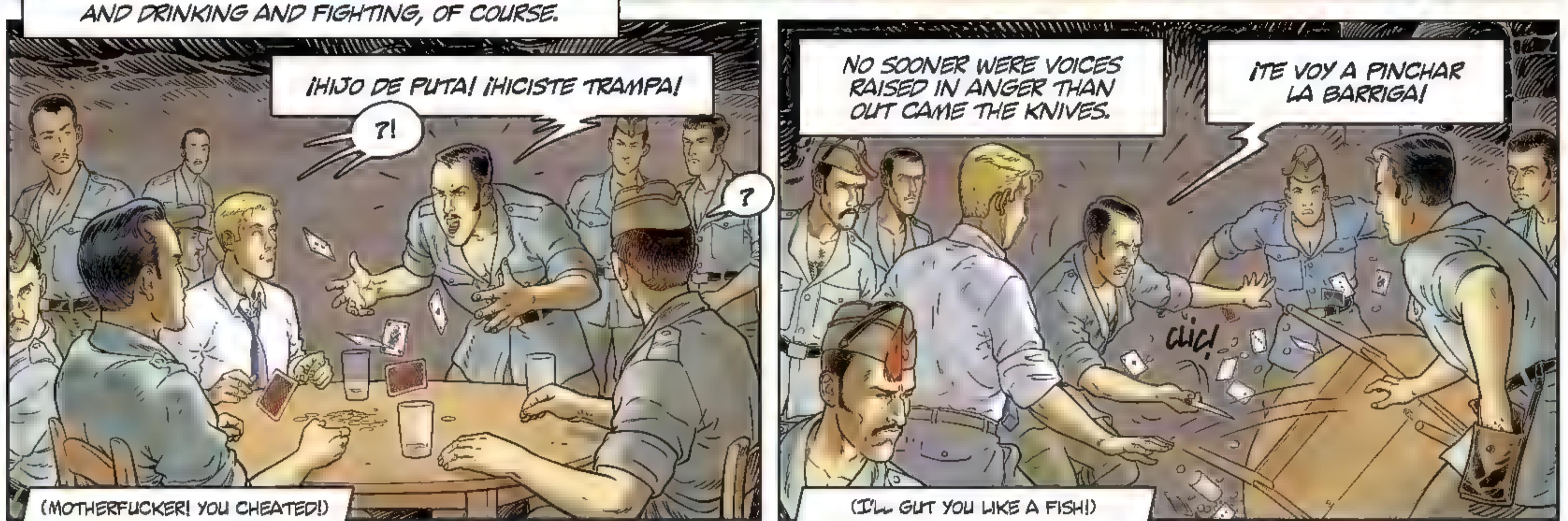
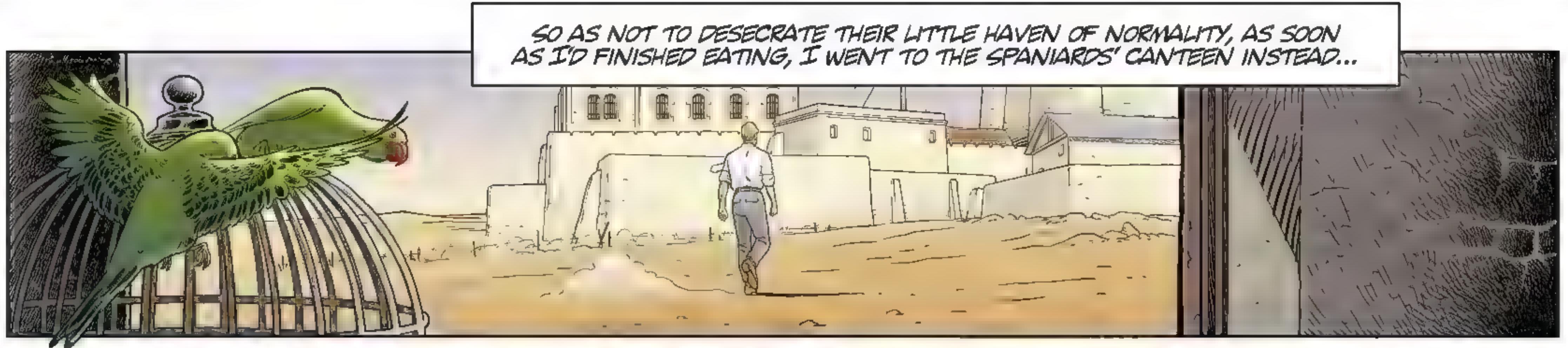
IT'S A WHOLE OTHER WORLD OUT HERE.

THE THREE PERMANENT MEMBERS OF STAFF--THE MANAGER, VIDAL, AND THE MECHANICS--AND THE PILOTS FLYING IN AND OUT LIVED IN A BUILDING OUTSIDE THE FORT, WHICH WAS AS COMFORTABLE AS IT COULD BE.



UNFORTUNATELY, WHEN I CAME TO SIT DOWN, OSCAR REFUSED TO HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH ME, AND HIS STUBBORN SILENCE EVENTUALLY AFFECTED EVERYONE ELSE.



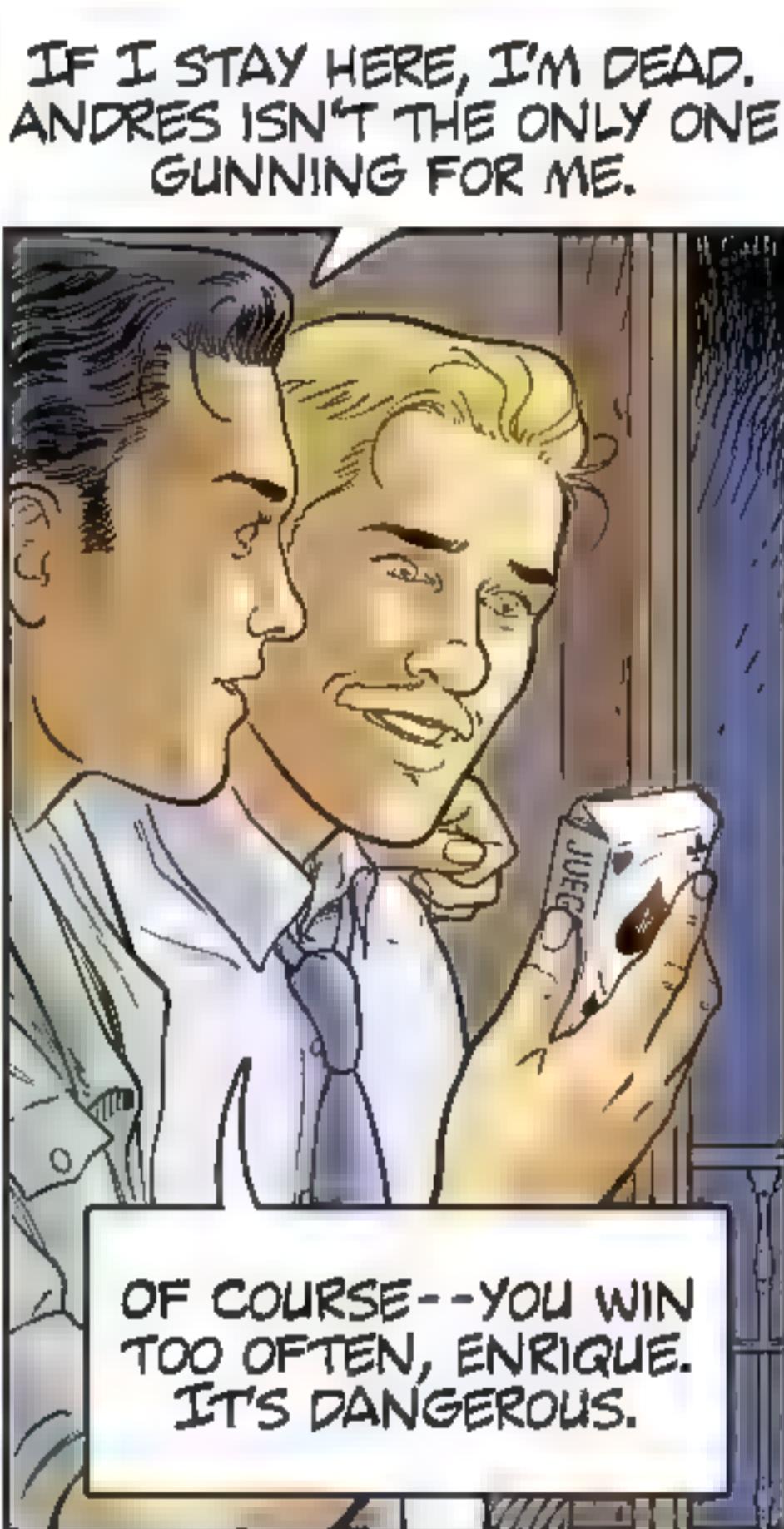




I'D SOMETIMES GIVE HIM THE KEYS TO OUR HANGAR SO THAT HE COULD SPEND THE NIGHT THERE WITH AN ARAB GIRL, WHO WASN'T ALLOWED INTO THE FORT.



A BED OF STONES OUTSIDE WAS LESS COMFORTABLE AND MUCH LESS SAFE--THE TRIBESMEN WOULDN'T HAVE APPROVED.

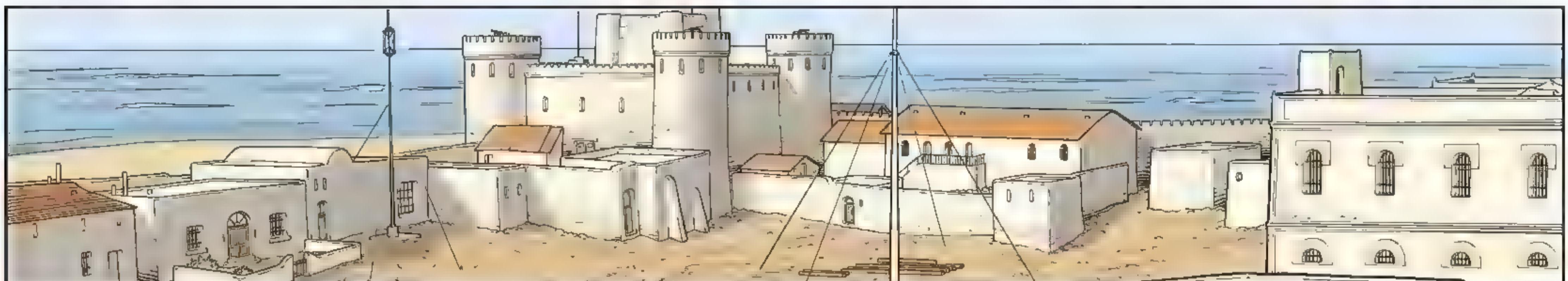


NOT MANY OF THEM UNDERSTAND YOU, BUT PLEASE BE CAREFUL.



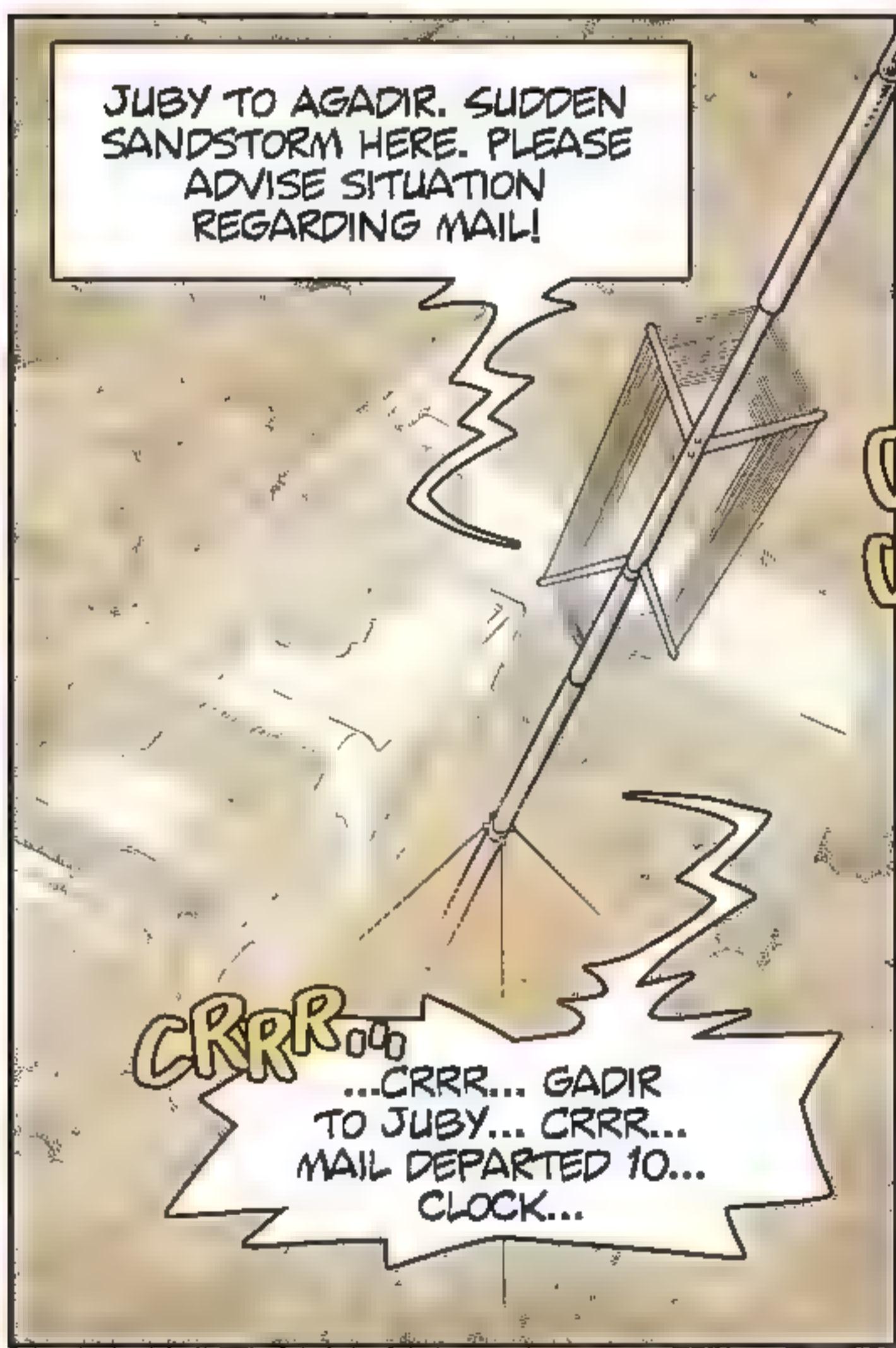


SEVERAL WEEKS WENT BY, PUNCTUATED BY ALL THE VICISSITUDES OF A LIFE DEDICATED TO THE DELIVERY OF AIRMAIL. ENGINE FAILURES, PILOTS LOST AND FOUND... OR CAPTURED BY THE BEDOUIN AND FREED IN EXCHANGE FOR A RANSOM PAYMENT--SOMETIMES.

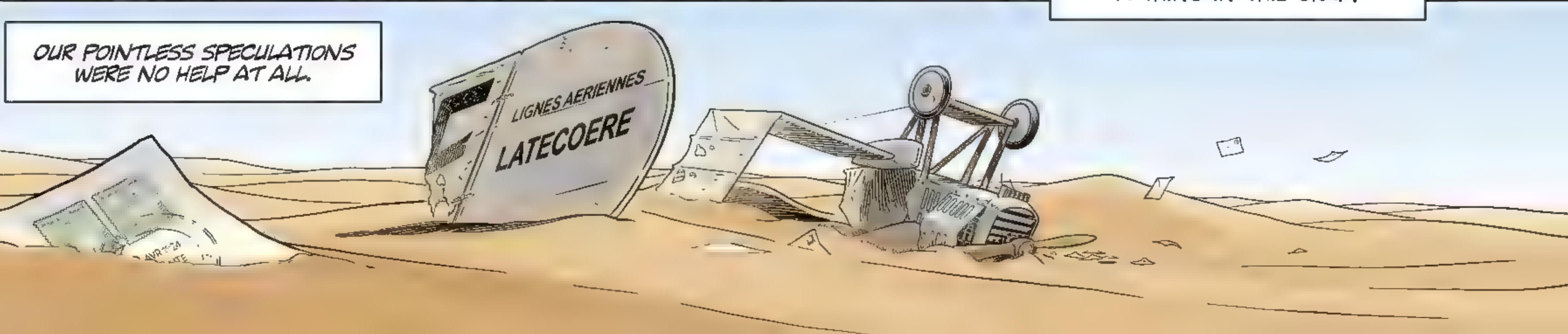


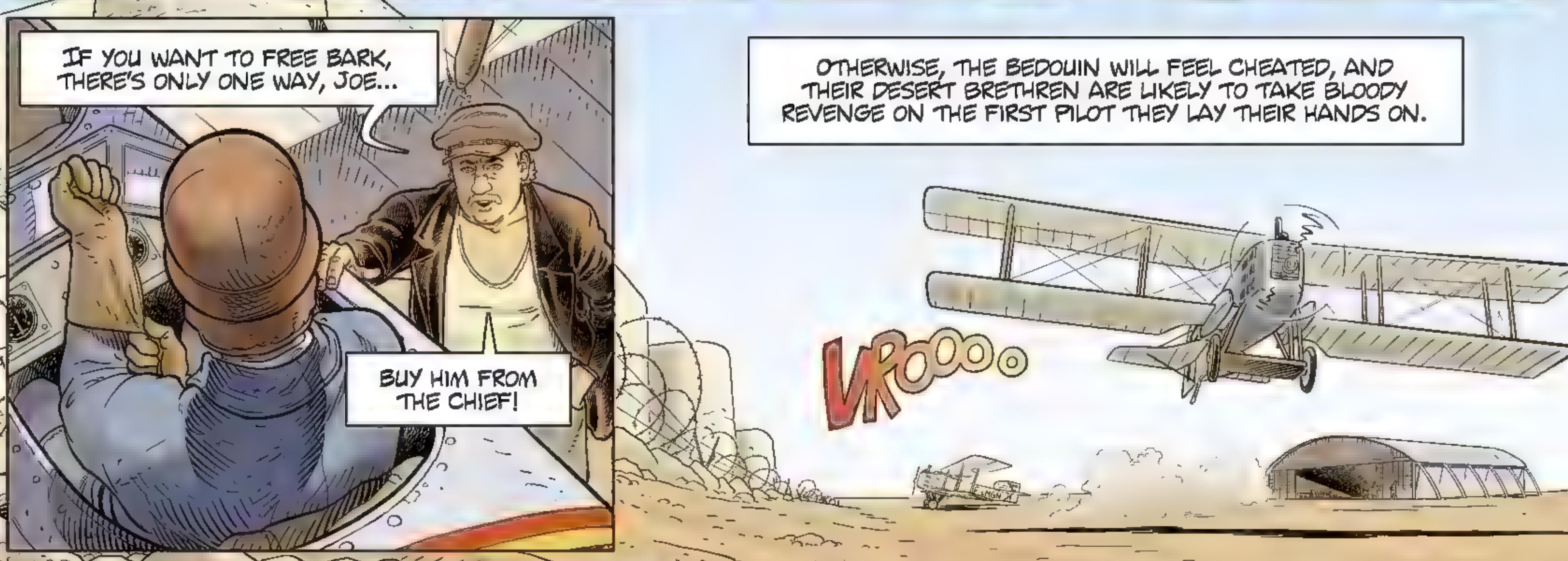
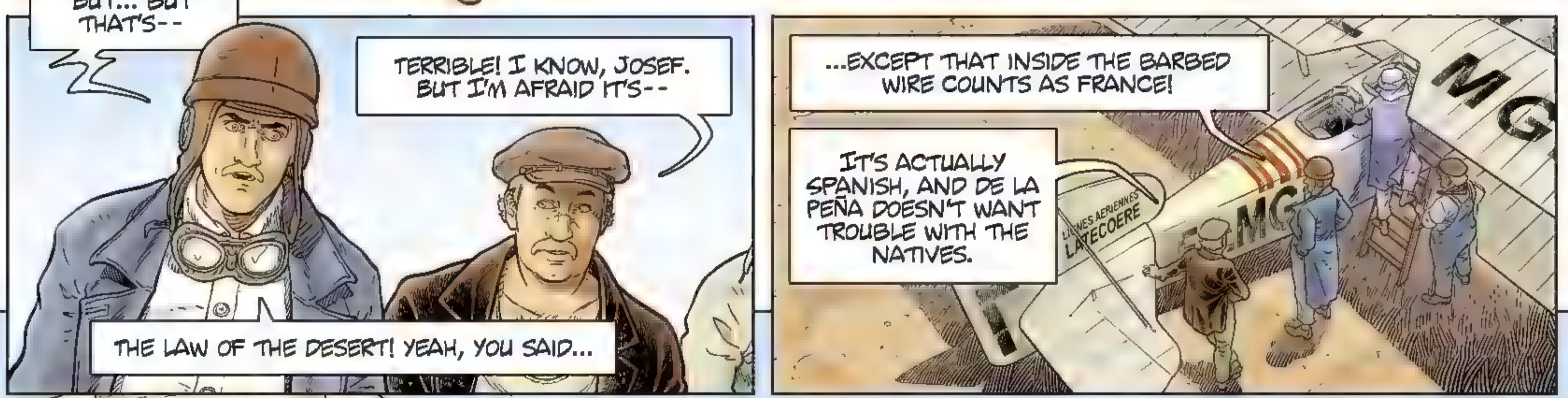
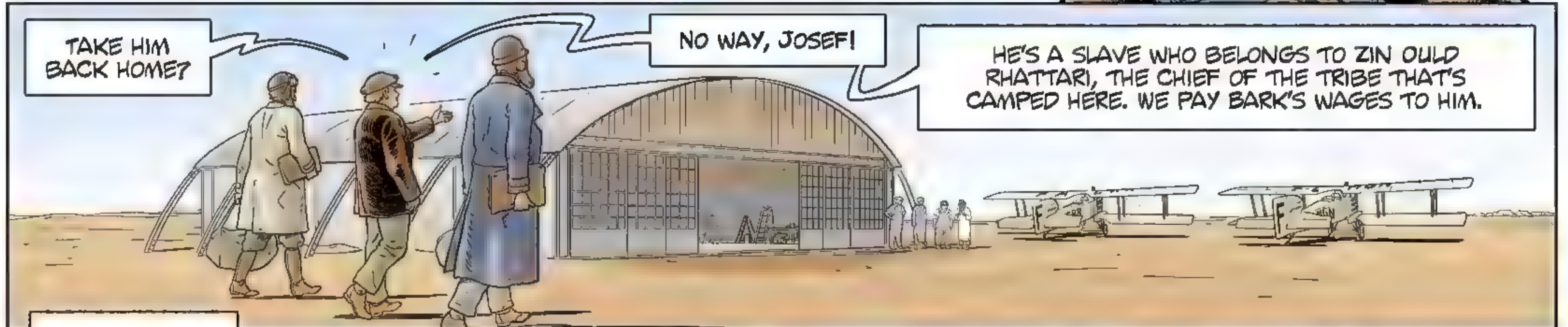
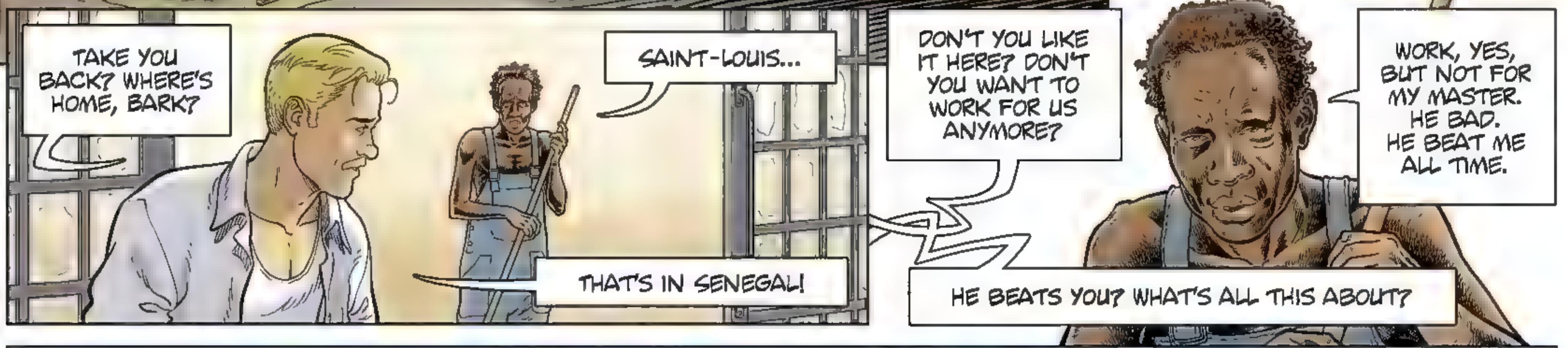
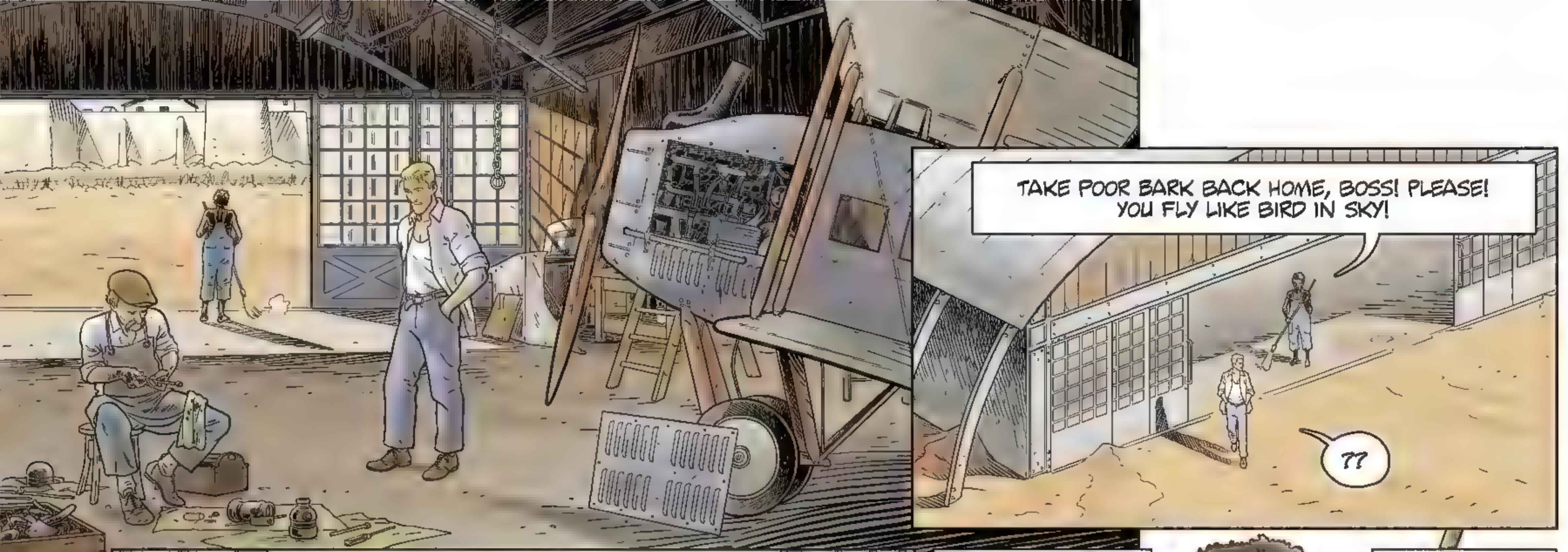
DAILY OCCURRENCES WHICH BECAME SO NORMAL THAT IN THE END THEY SEEMED MUNDANE.

BUT WHEN THE ELEMENTS CONSPIRED AGAINST US TO GROUND OUR PLANES, ALL WE COULD DO WAS DANCE AROUND THE WIRELESS LIKE SAVAGES APPEALING TO THEIR GODS FOR A FAVORABLE PROPHECY.

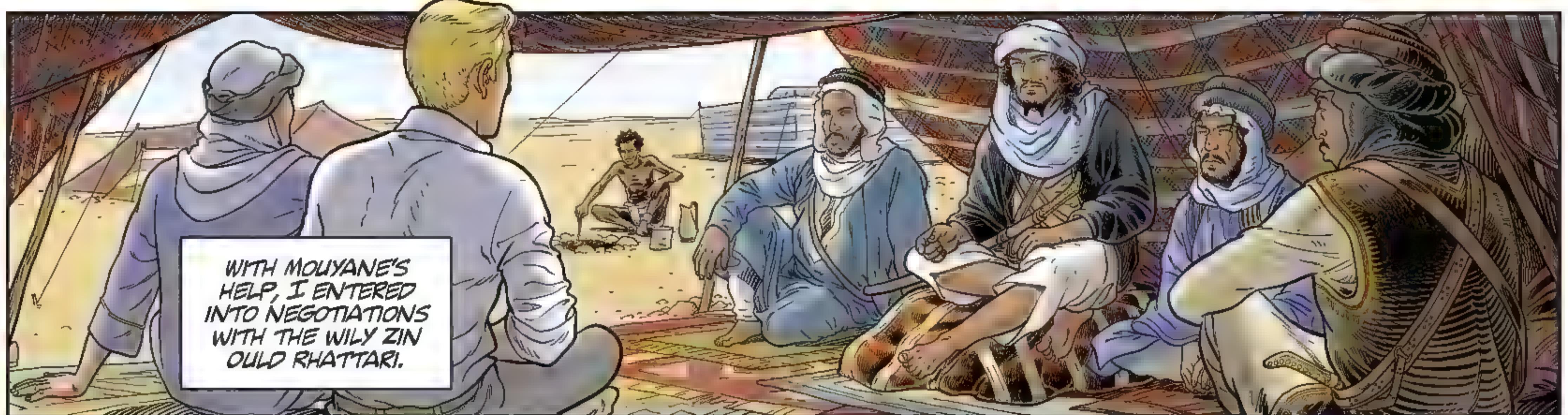


OUR POINTLESS SPECULATIONS WERE NO HELP AT ALL.





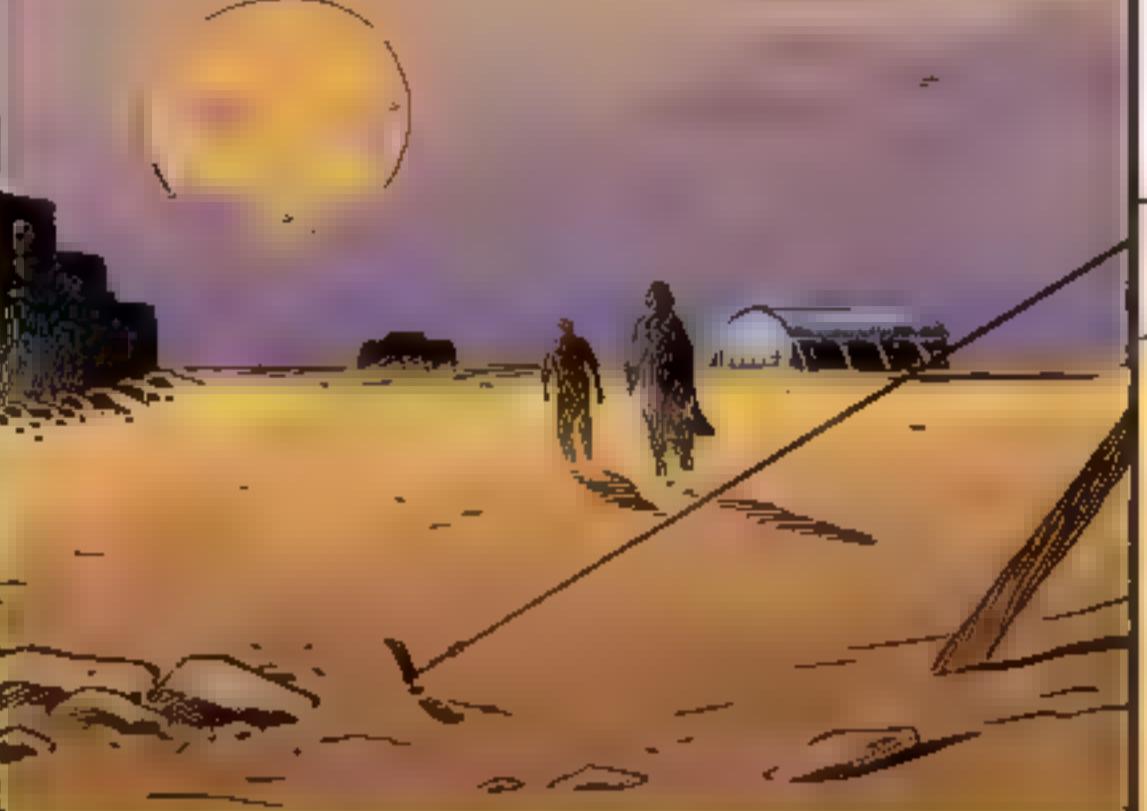
"RETTEN WAS ZU RETTEN IST," (1) AS THE GERMANS SAY. SO I SPENT MY DAYS AT CAPE JUBY TRYING TO BUY BARK FROM THE TRIBE.



(1) "SAVE WHAT CAN BE SAVED."

WE SPENT SEVERAL WEEKS BARTERING OVER GLASSES OF TEA THAT SEEMED TO CONTAIN MORE SUGAR THAN WATER. HOW COULD ANYONE DRINK THAT STUFF?

I FORCED IT DOWN, THOUGH, BECAUSE IT WAS AN INSULT TO REFUSE HOSPITALITY IN A BURYULUT HAJAR. (1)

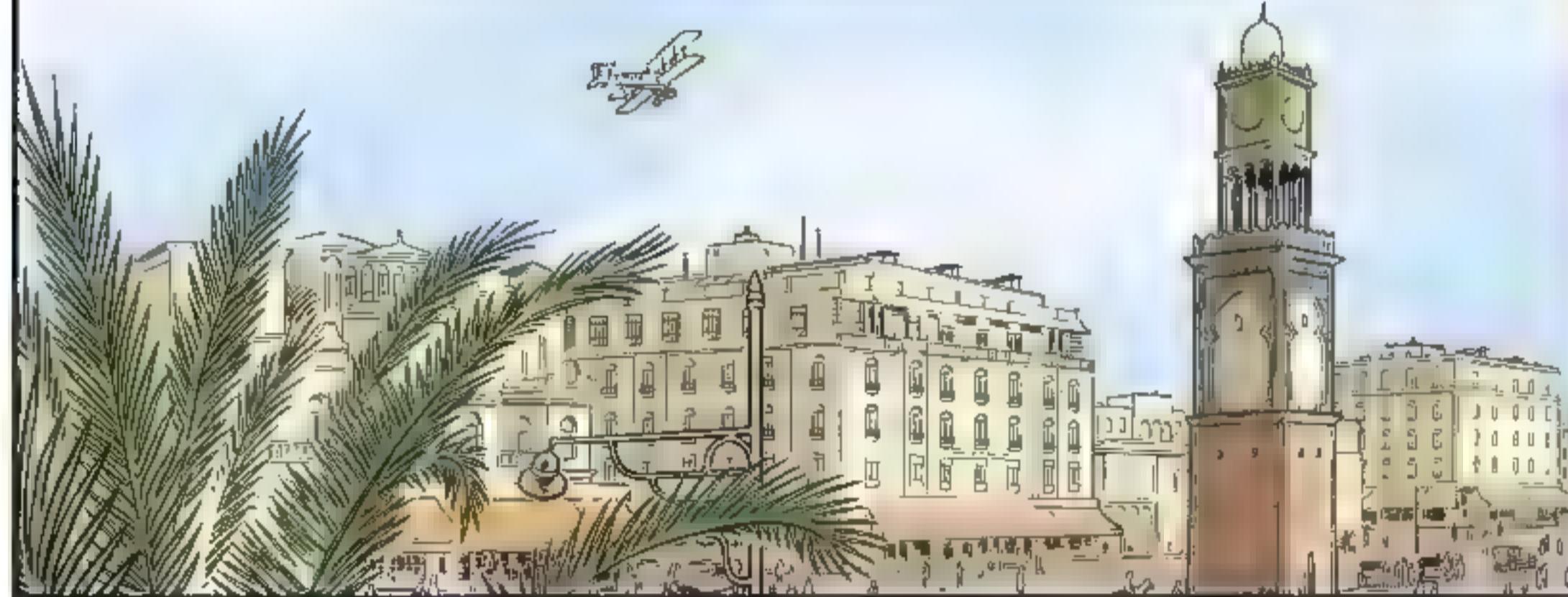


AND THAT ONE JUST SAID--

TELL HIM TO GO TO HELL!

IT OBVIOUSLY WASN'T COMMON FOR EUROPEANS TO WANT TO BUY SLAVES. AND FOR THIS BAND OF OUTLAWS, ANYTHING THEY GOT WOULD BE A GODSEND.

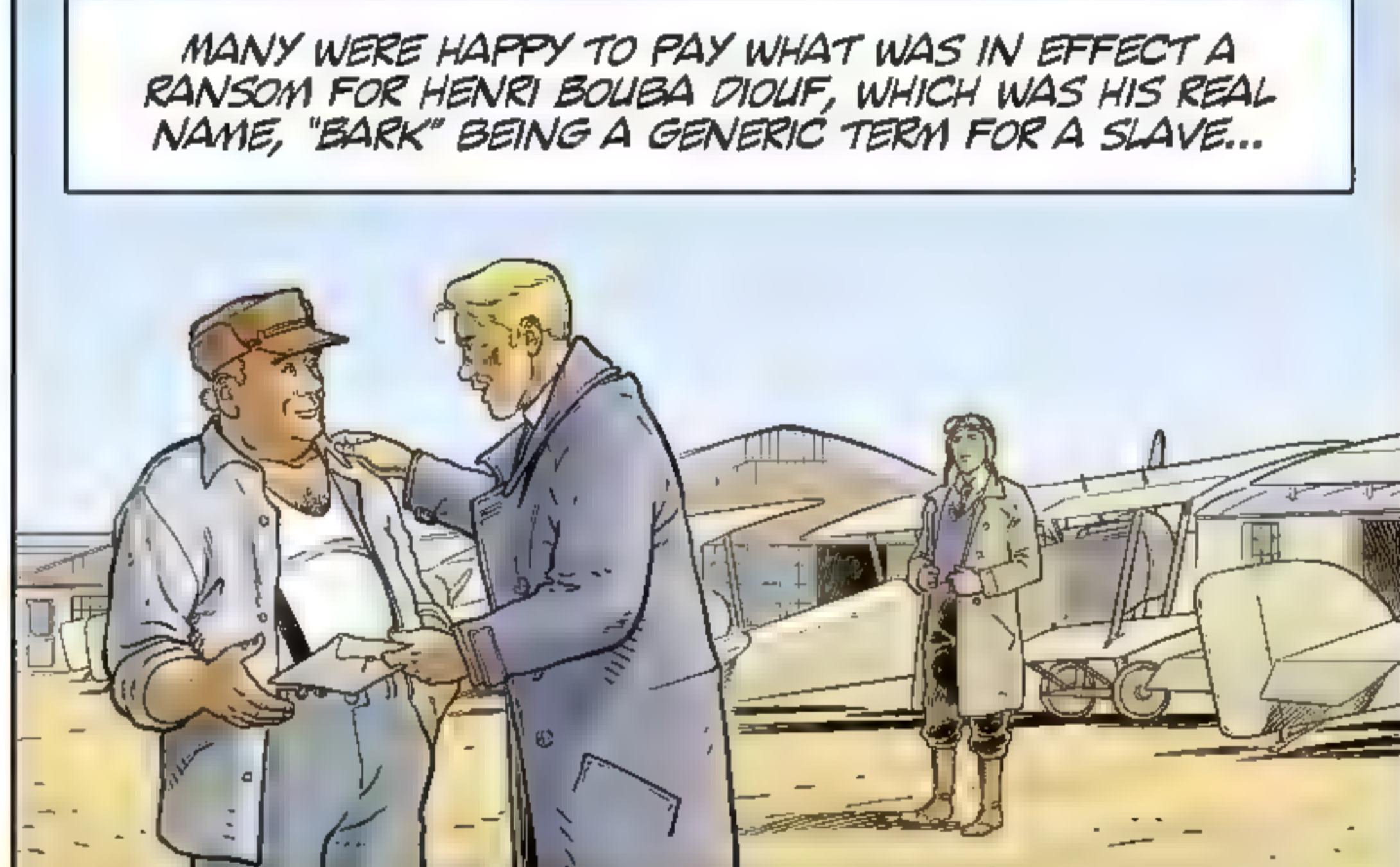
AFTER NUMEROUS MEETINGS AND GLASSES OF TEA, THE PRICE EVENTUALLY CAME DOWN, BUT IT WAS STILL TOO HIGH FOR MY PILOT'S WAGES AND THE LITTLE SAVINGS I HAD.



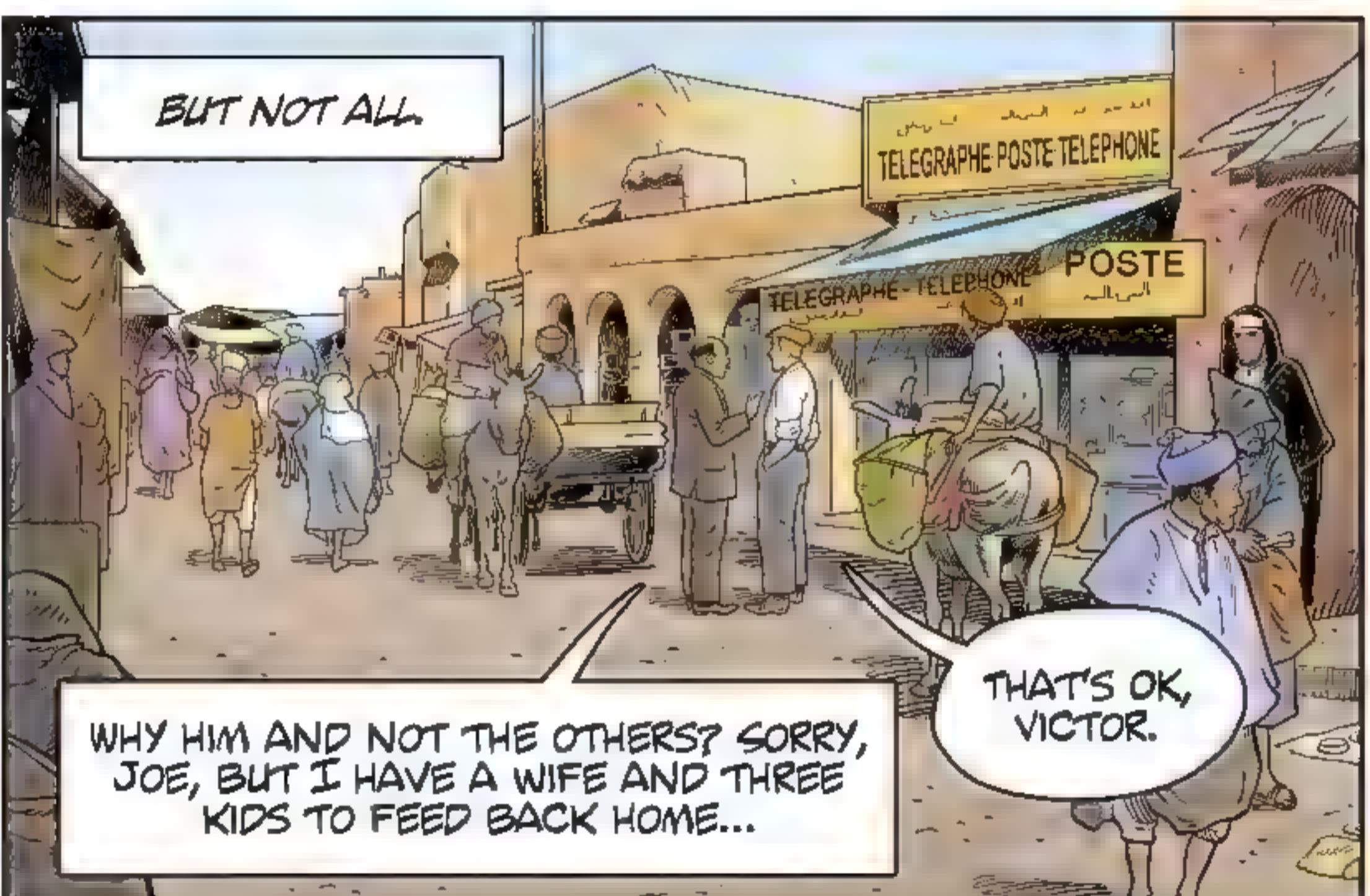
SO I ASKED MY FELLOW PILOTS ON THE CASABLANCA-DAKAR ROUTE TO CONTRIBUTE TO A "BARK FUND."



MANY WERE HAPPY TO PAY WHAT WAS IN EFFECT A RANSOM FOR HENRI BOUBA DIOUF, WHICH WAS HIS REAL NAME, "BARK" BEING A GENERIC TERM FOR A SLAVE...

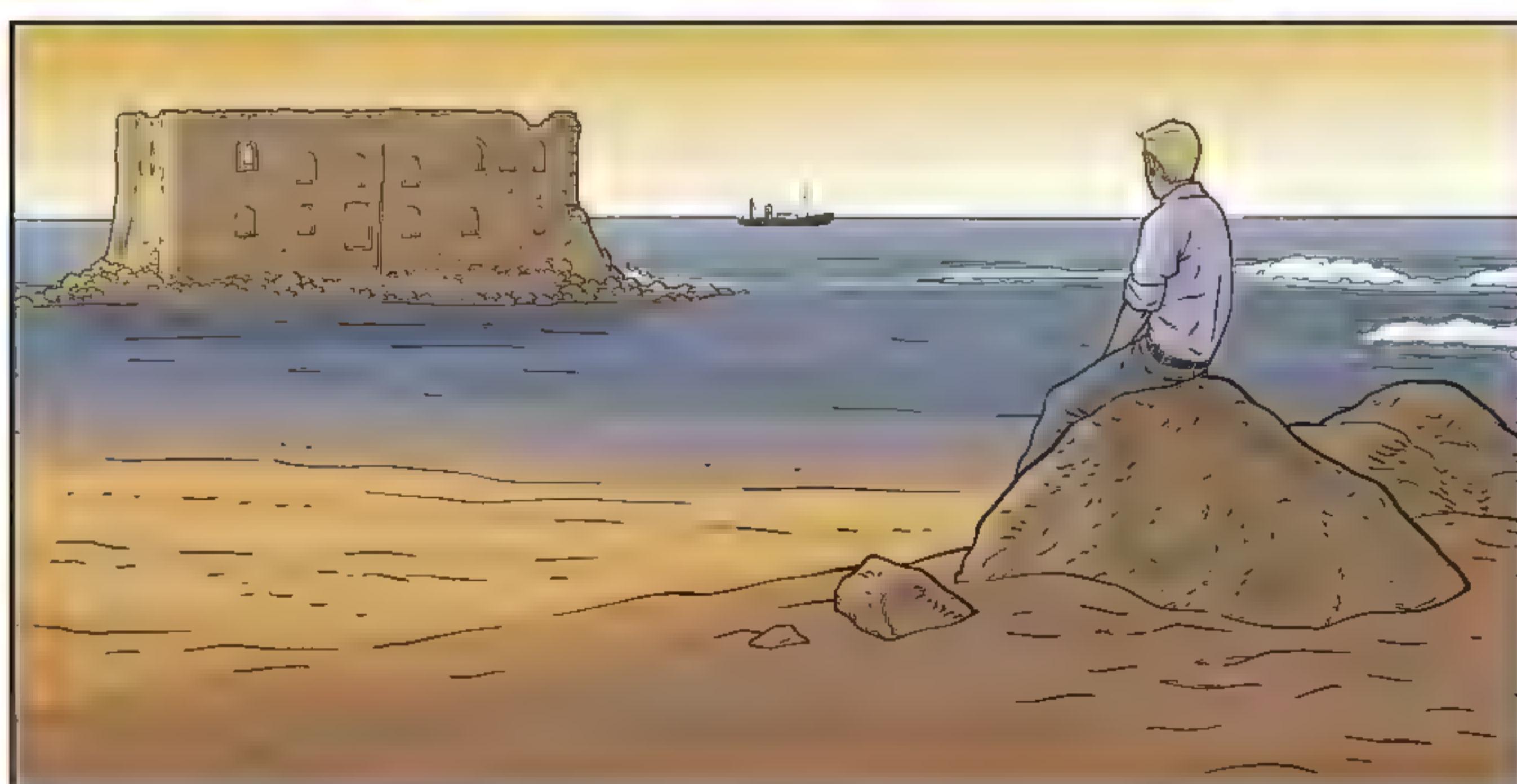


BUT NOT ALL.



WHY HIM AND NOT THE OTHERS? SORRY, JOE, BUT I HAVE A WIFE AND THREE KIDS TO FEED BACK HOME...

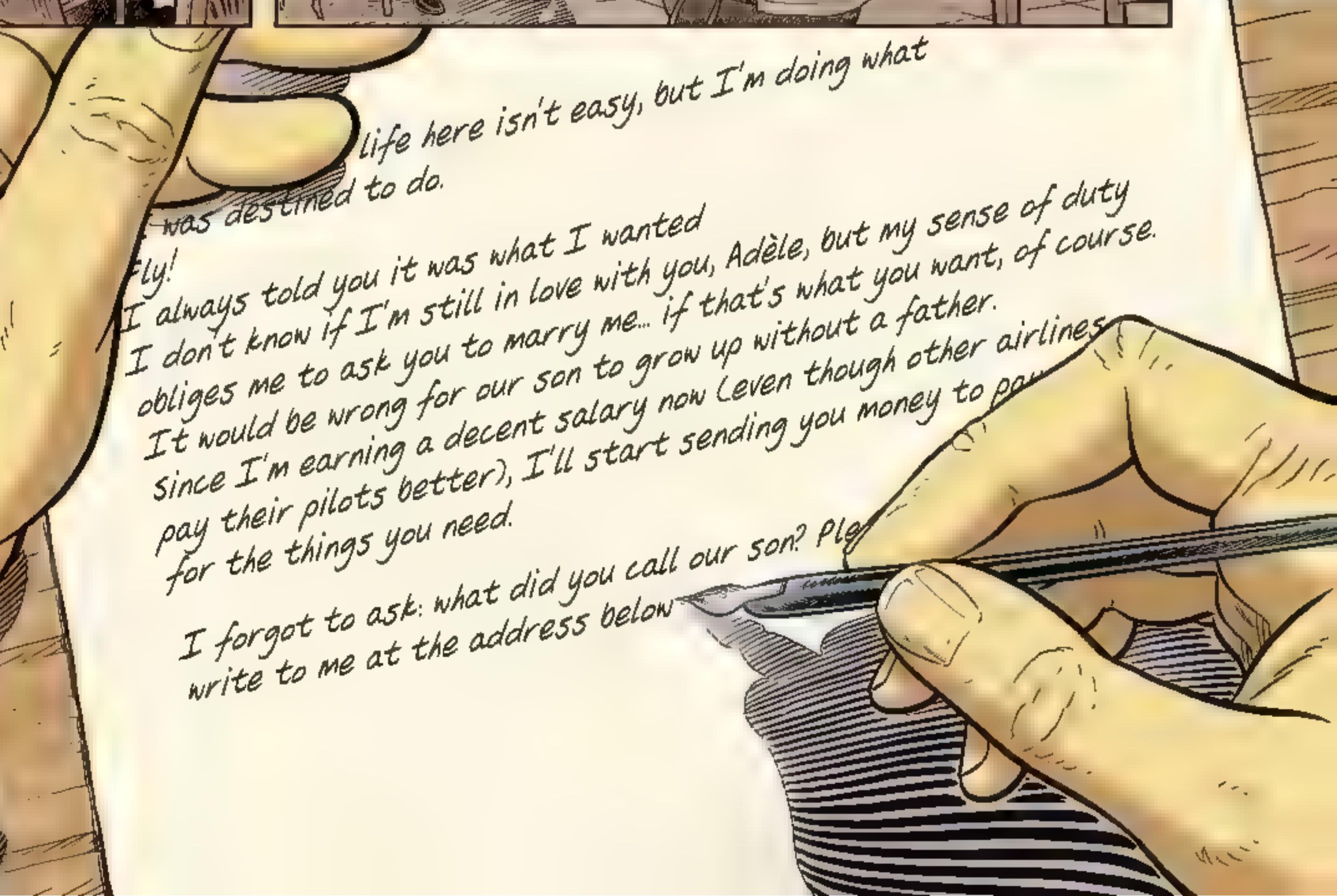
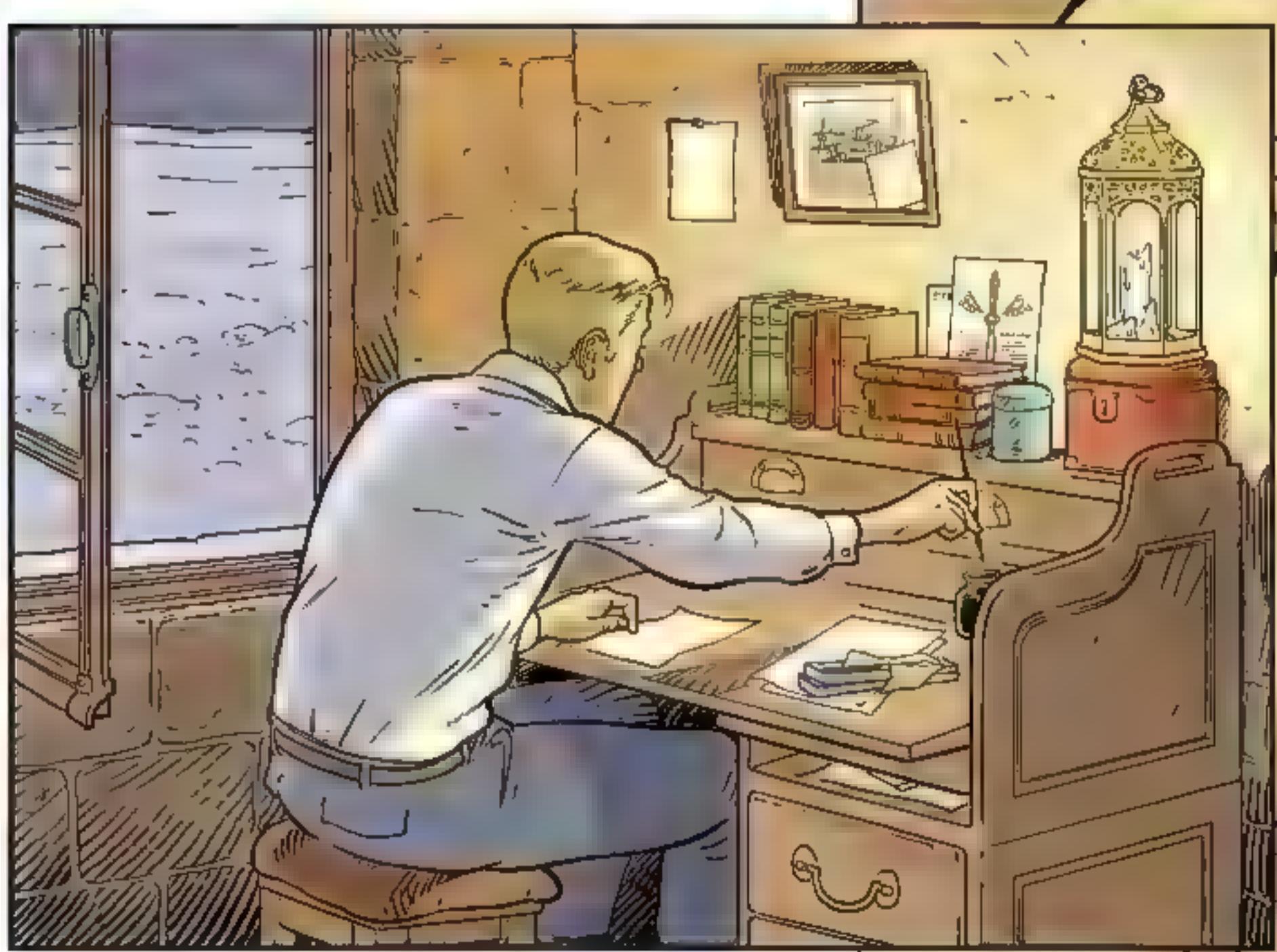
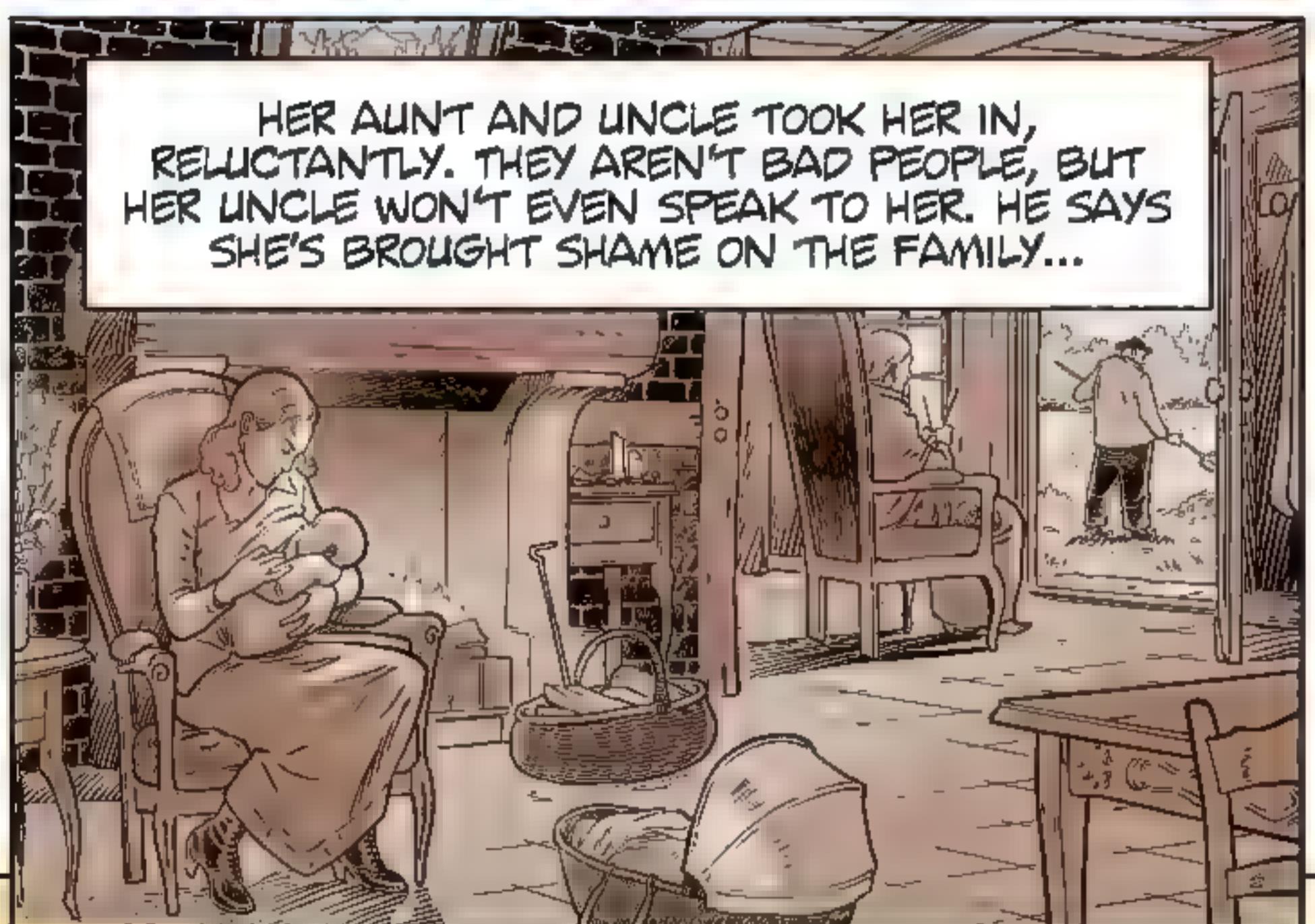
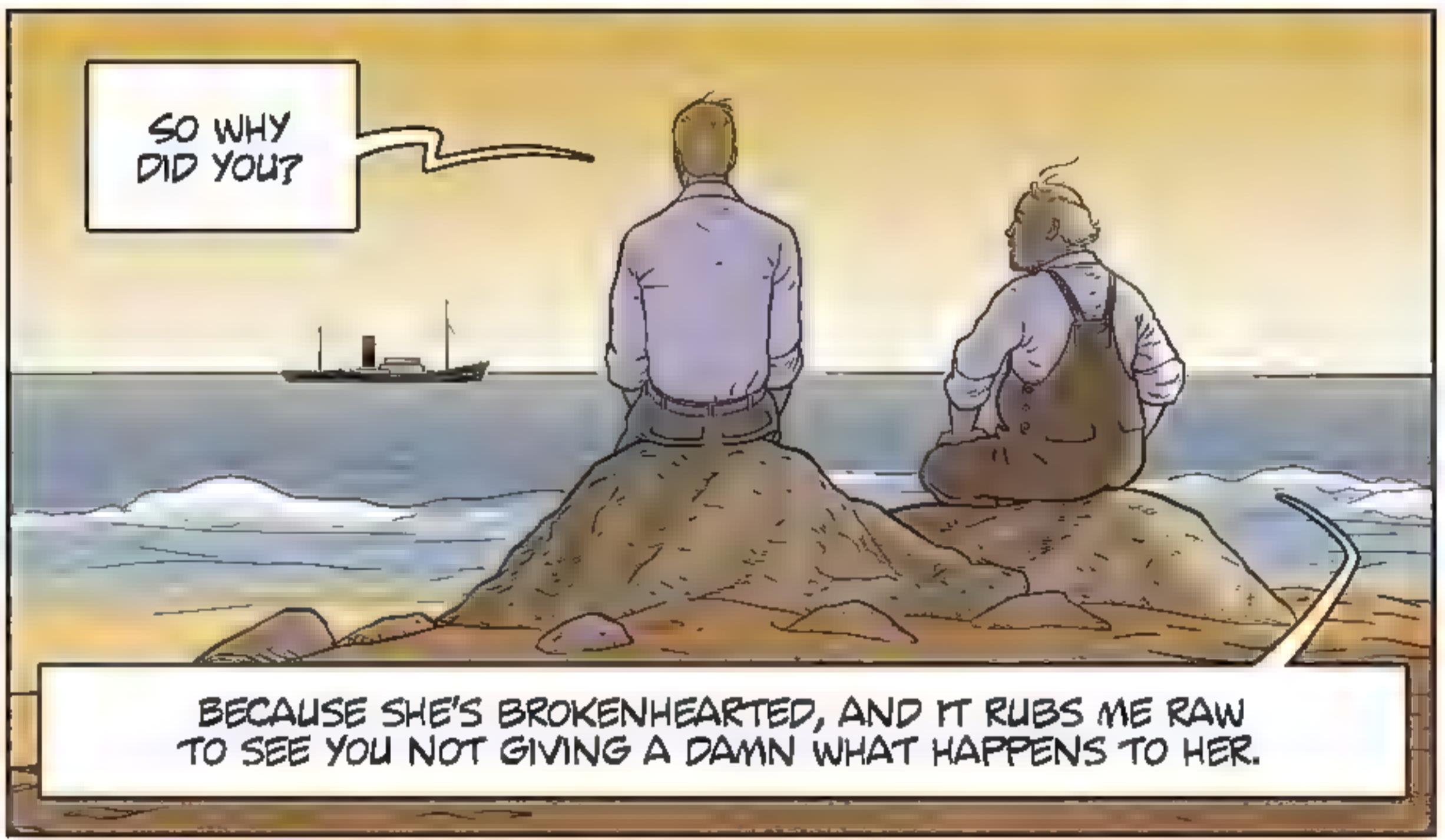
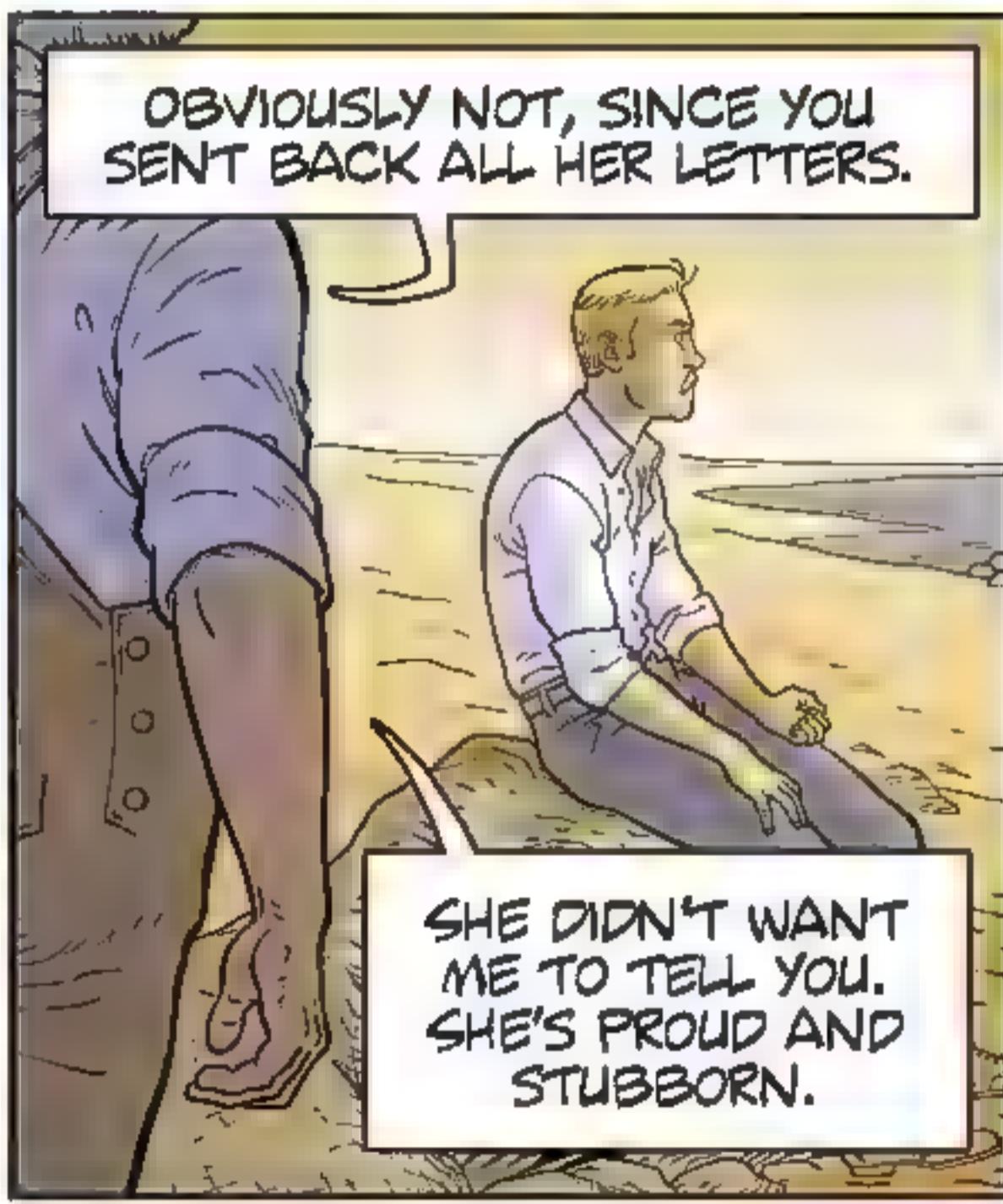
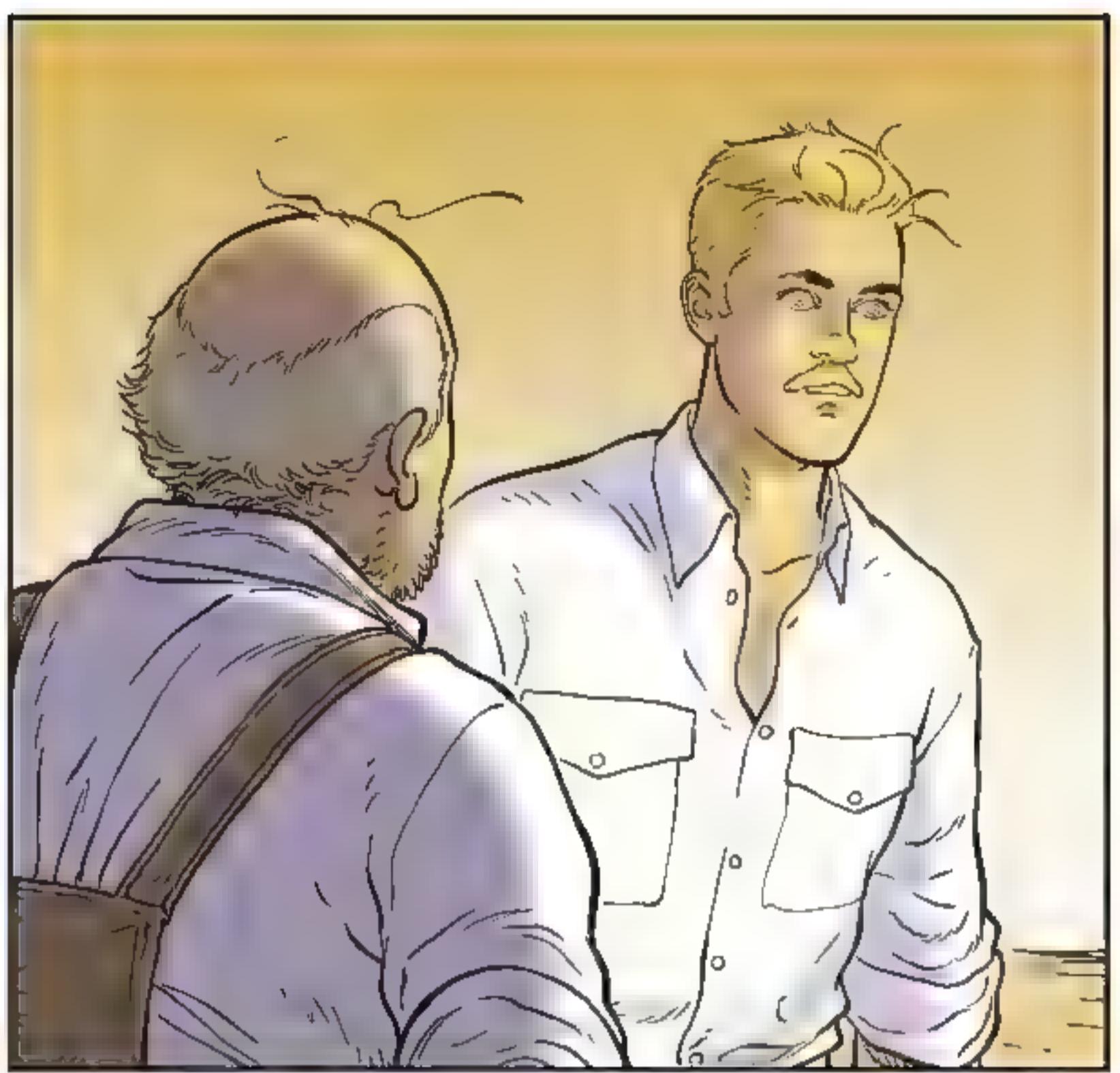
THAT'S OK, VICTOR.

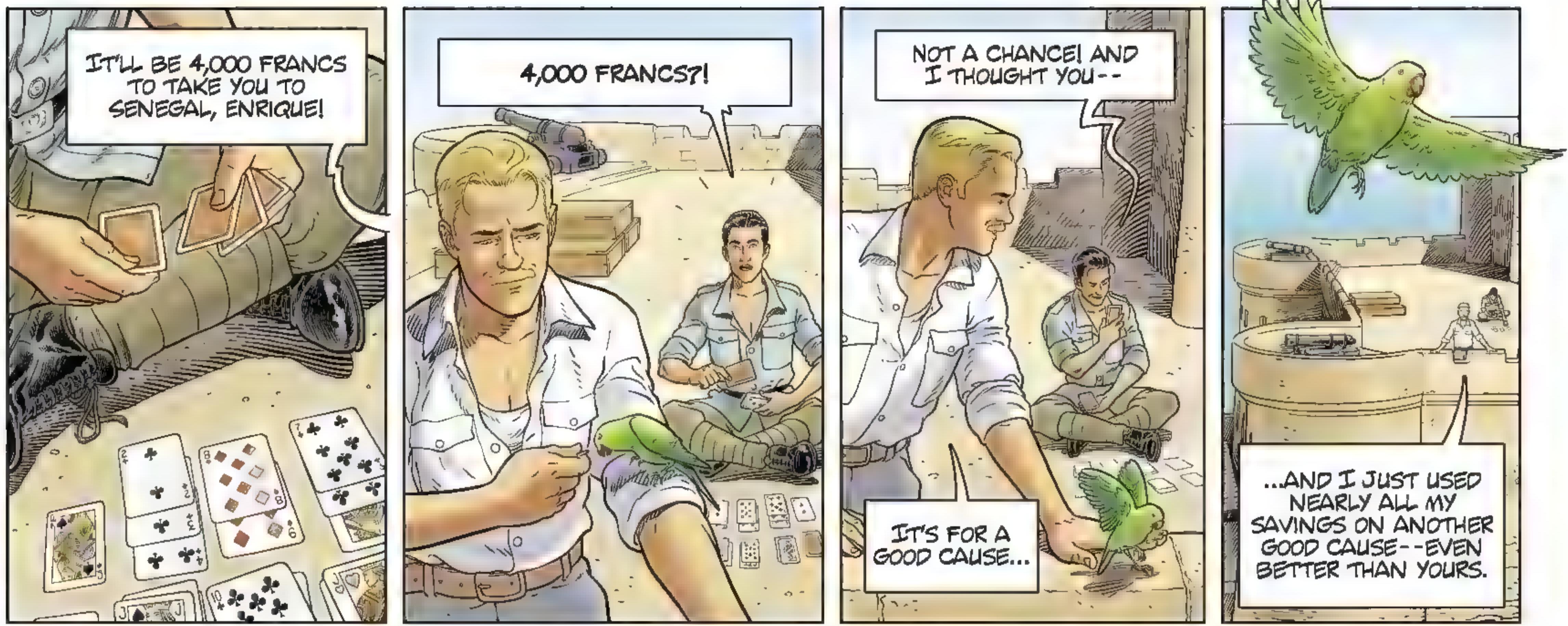


SO YOU'D BEND OVER BACKWARD TO HELP A BLACK BEGGER YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT, BUT YOU WON'T GIVE A PENNY TO THE WOMAN WHO GAVE YOU HER HEART AND HER BODY?



(1) A BEDOULIN TENT (LITERALLY "HOUSE OF HAIR").

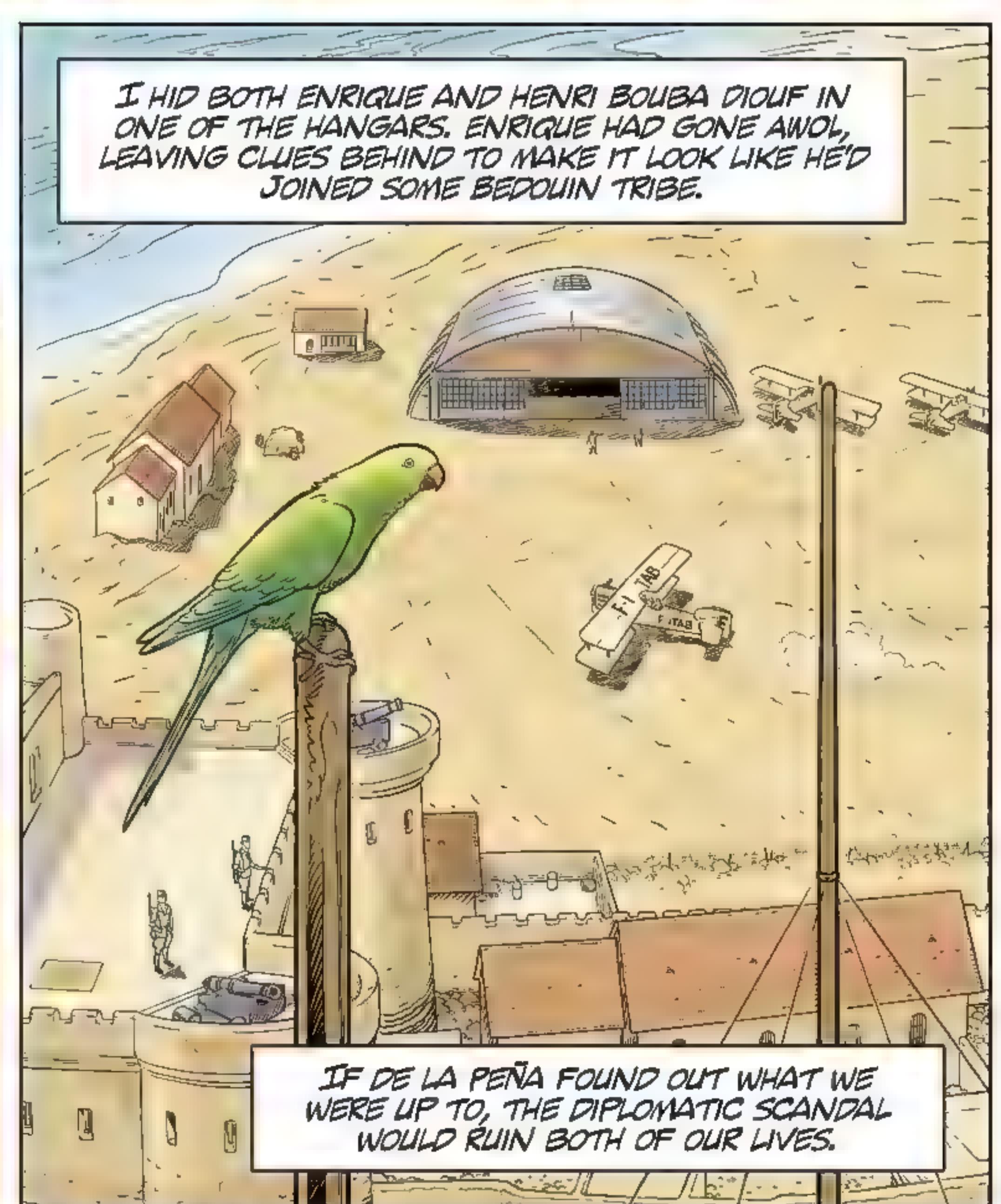




ENRIQUE PAID UP, AND I FINALLY AGREED ON A PRICE FOR BARK. HE WAS HANDED OVER TO ME, AND I IMMEDIATELY SIGNED AN OFFICIAL DOCUMENT GIVING HIM HIS FREEDOM. THERE WAS A BIG CEREMONY WITH THAT CROOK ZIN OULD RHATTARI.

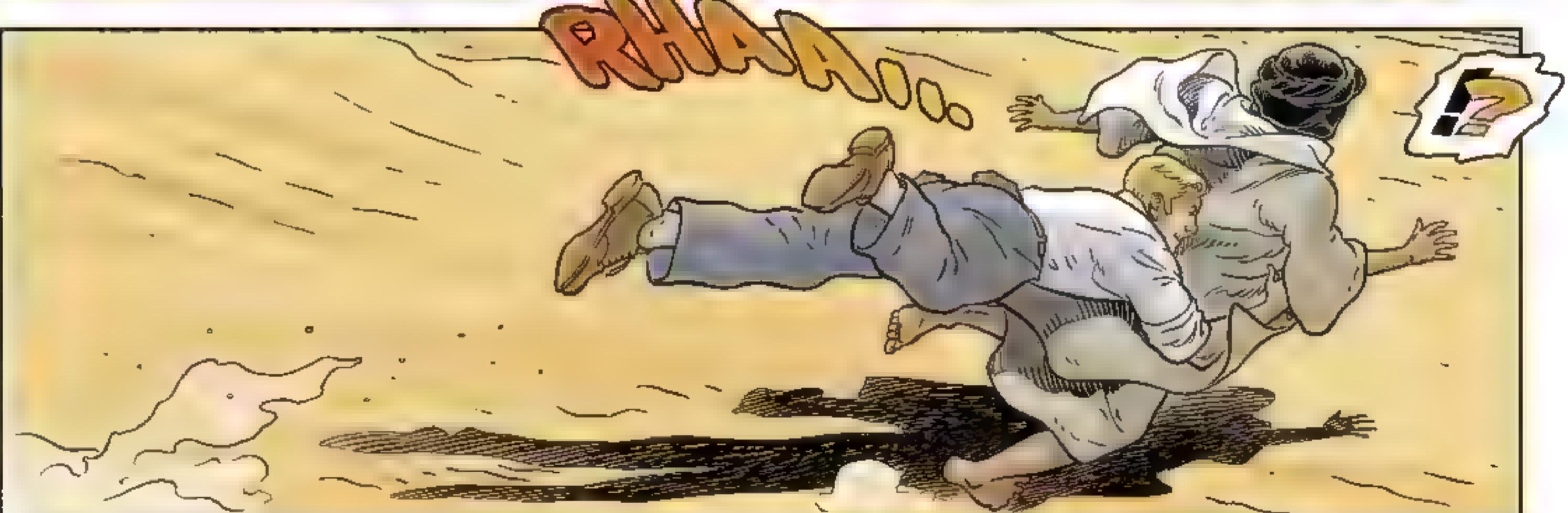
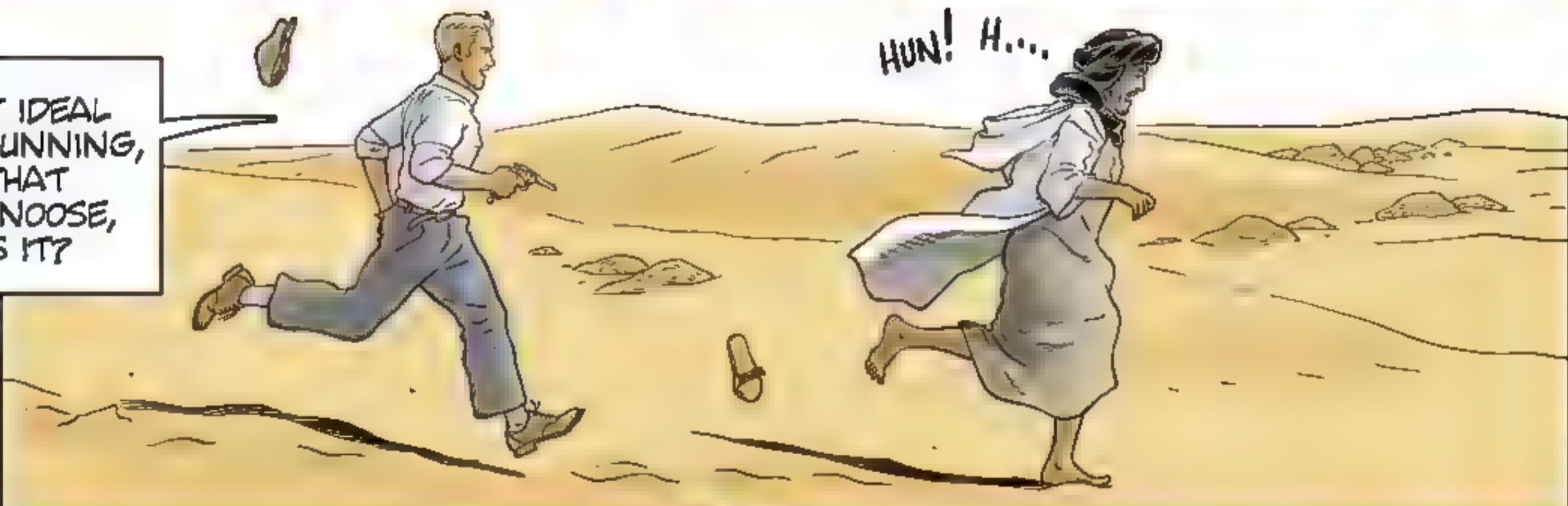
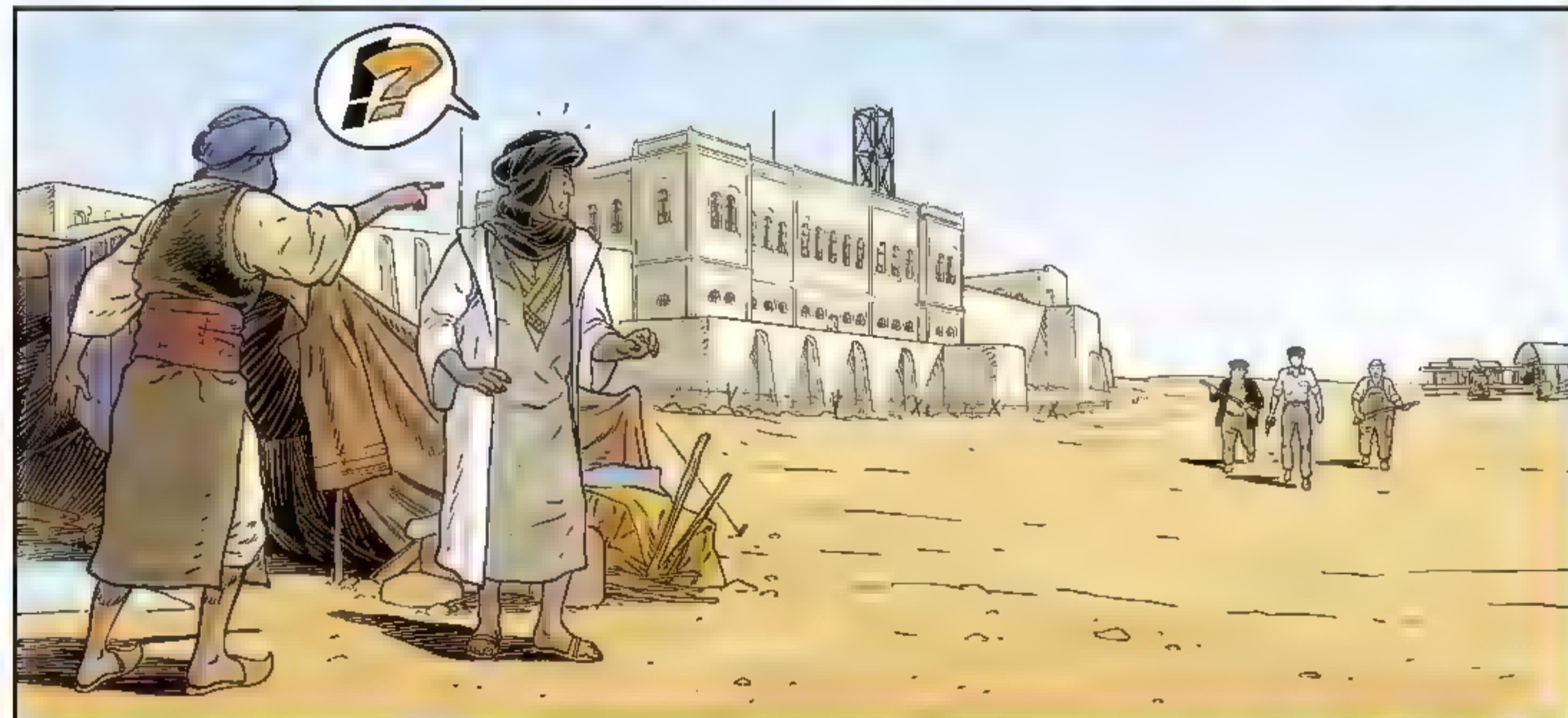
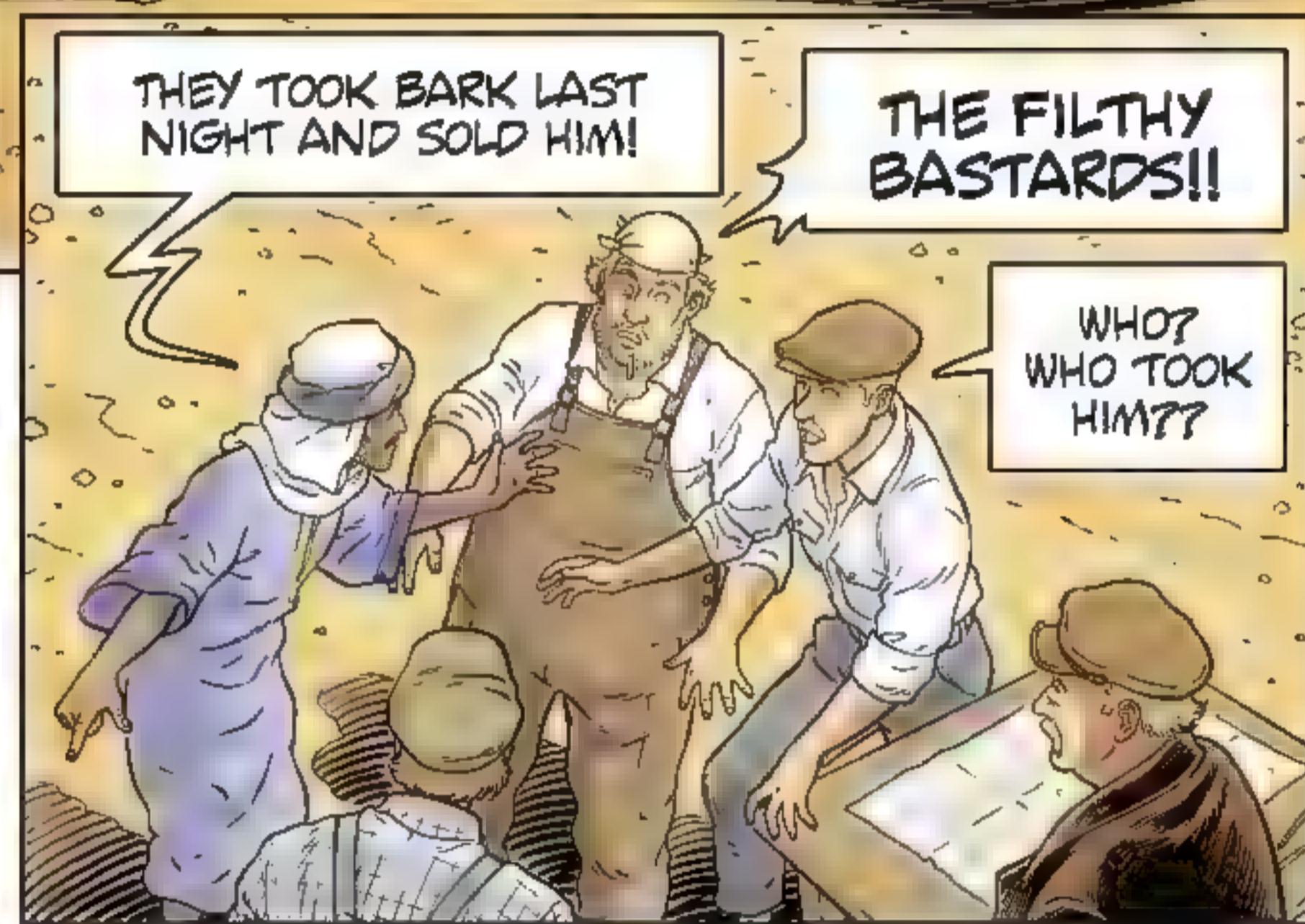
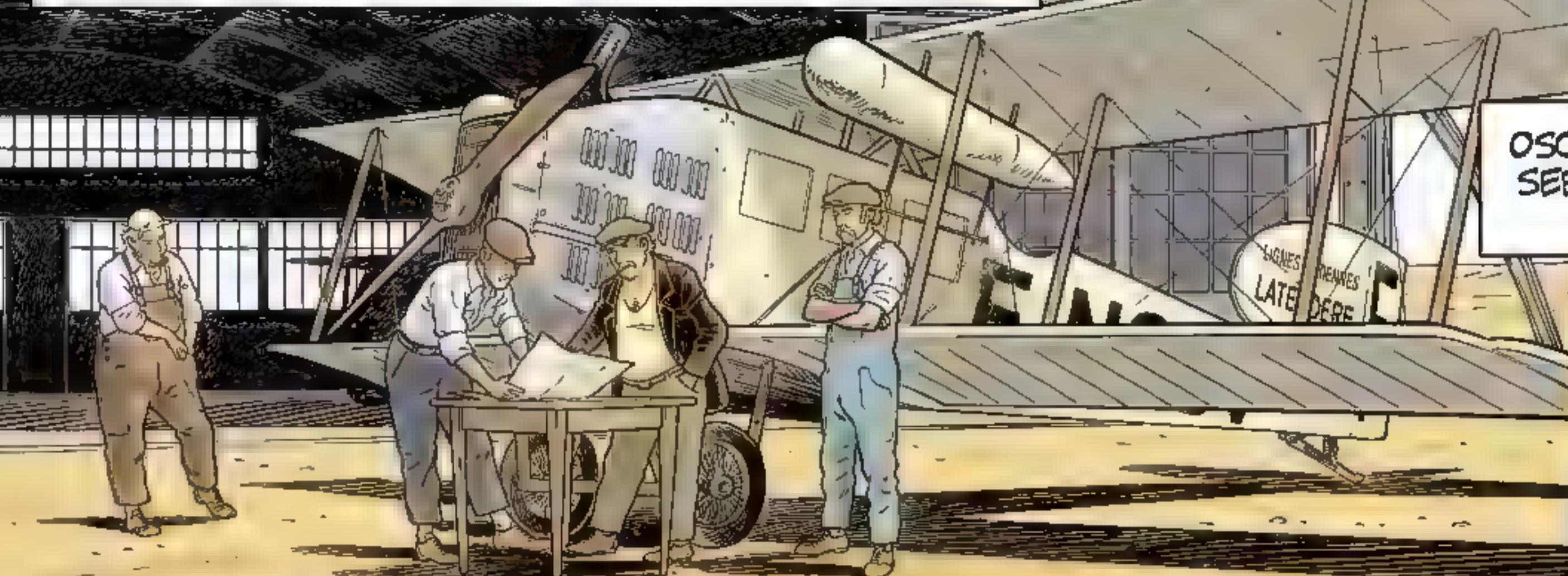


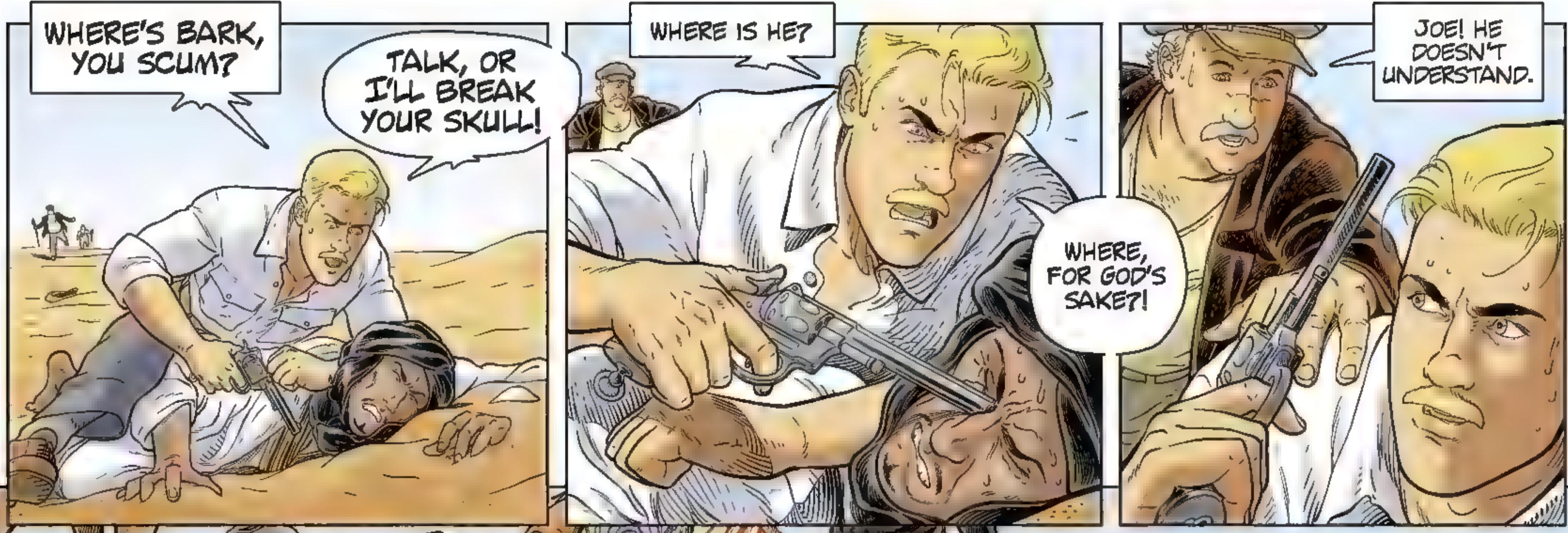
LEGALLY, HE WAS ALSO MY SON. AND THAT WAS HOW I SUDDENLY FOUND MYSELF WITH TWO KIDS!



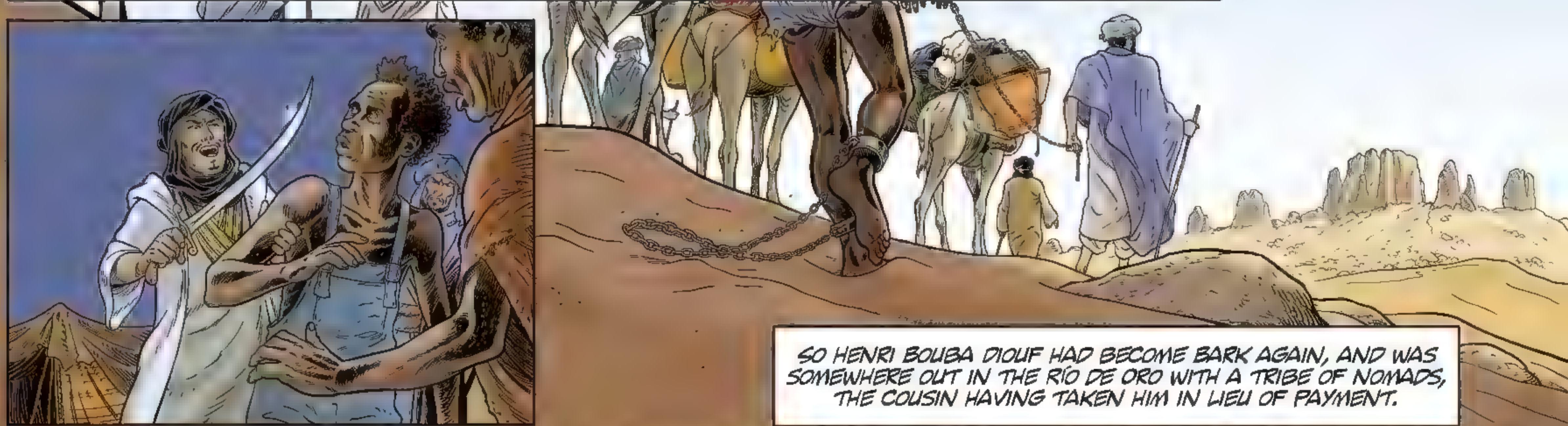
VIDAL WAS DEAD SET AGAINST IT, BUT I'D MANAGED TO PERSUADE HIM TO LET ME FLY TO DAKAR IN THE LIMO (1) SO I COULD TAKE ENRIQUE WITH ME.

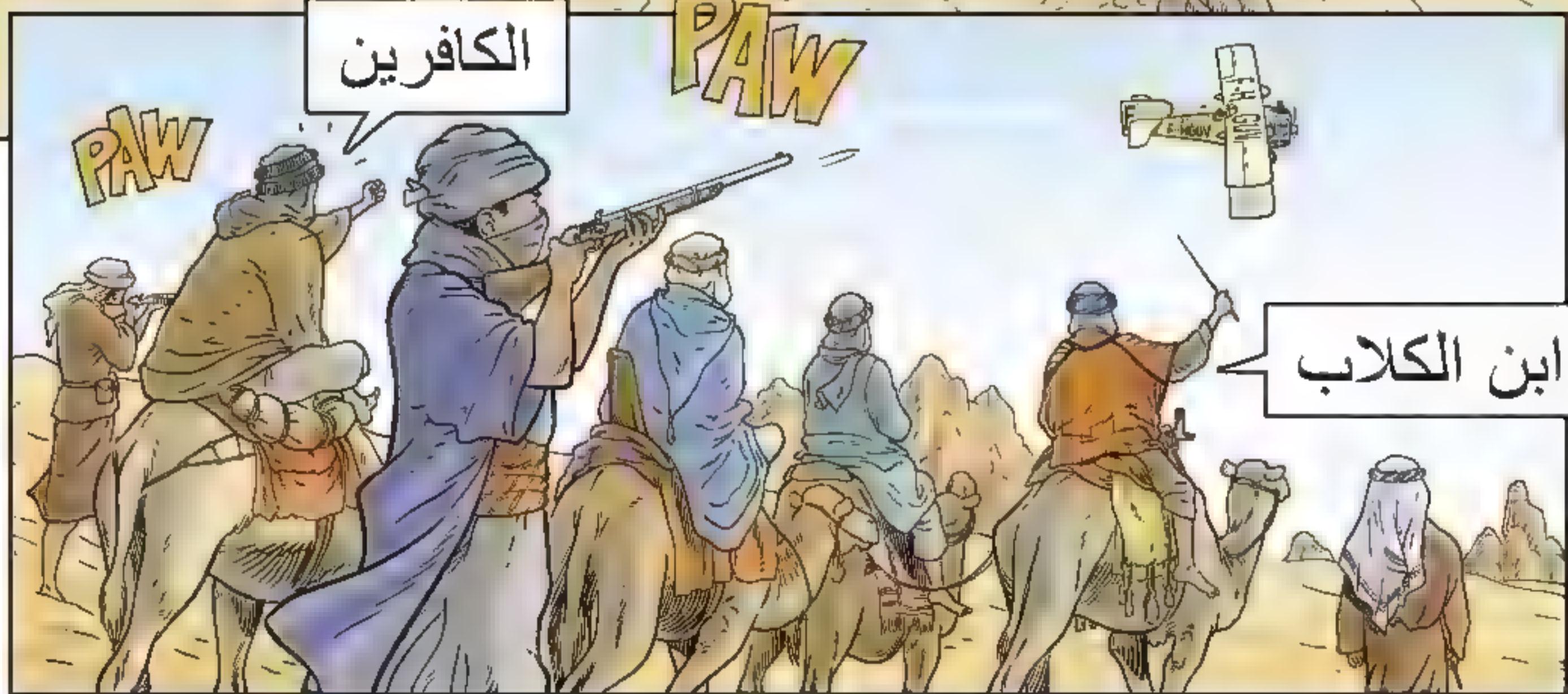
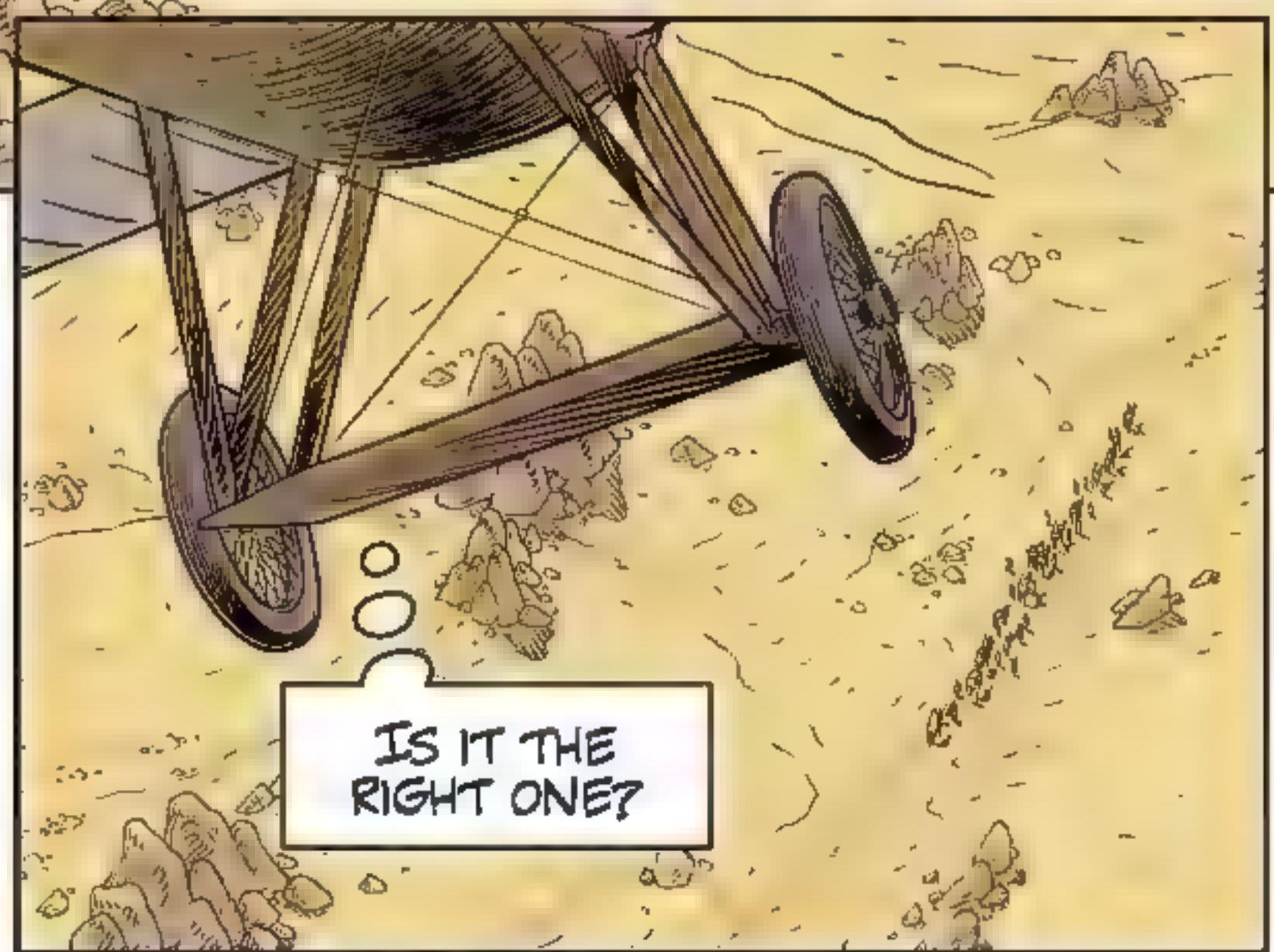
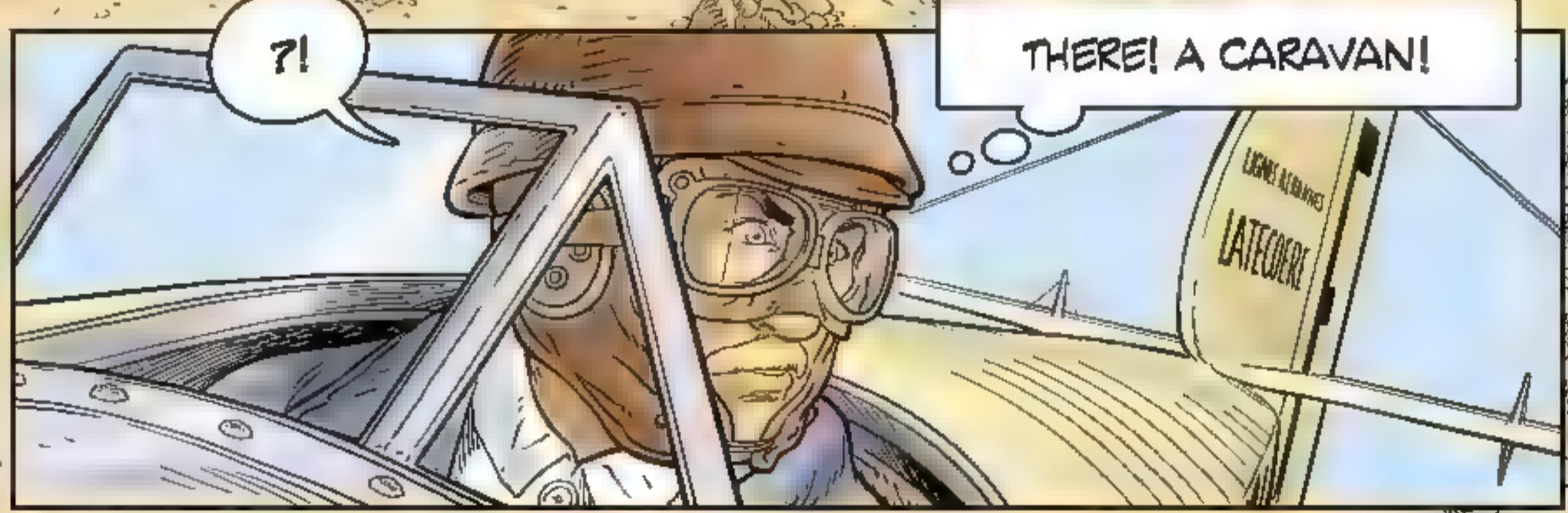
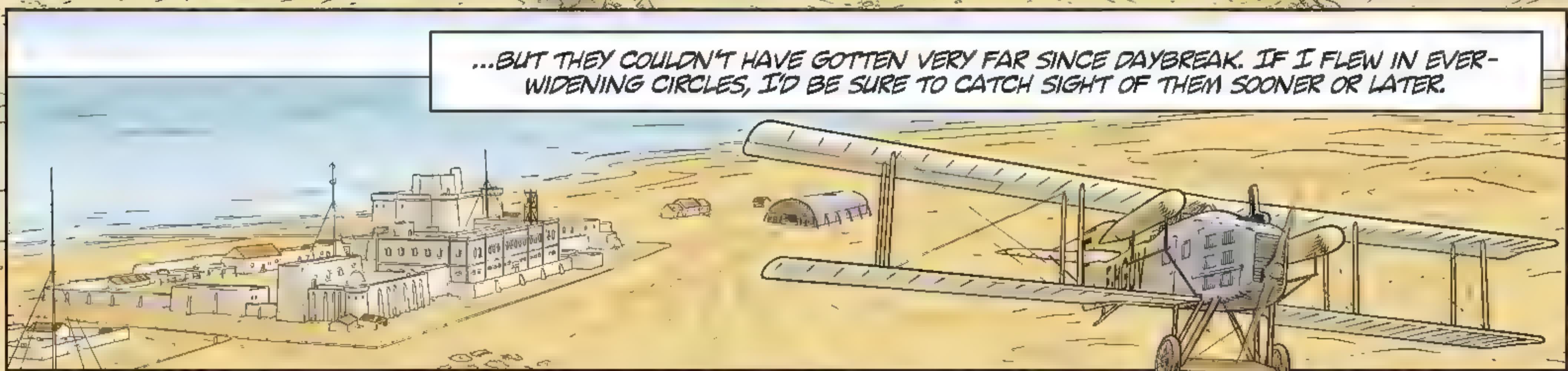
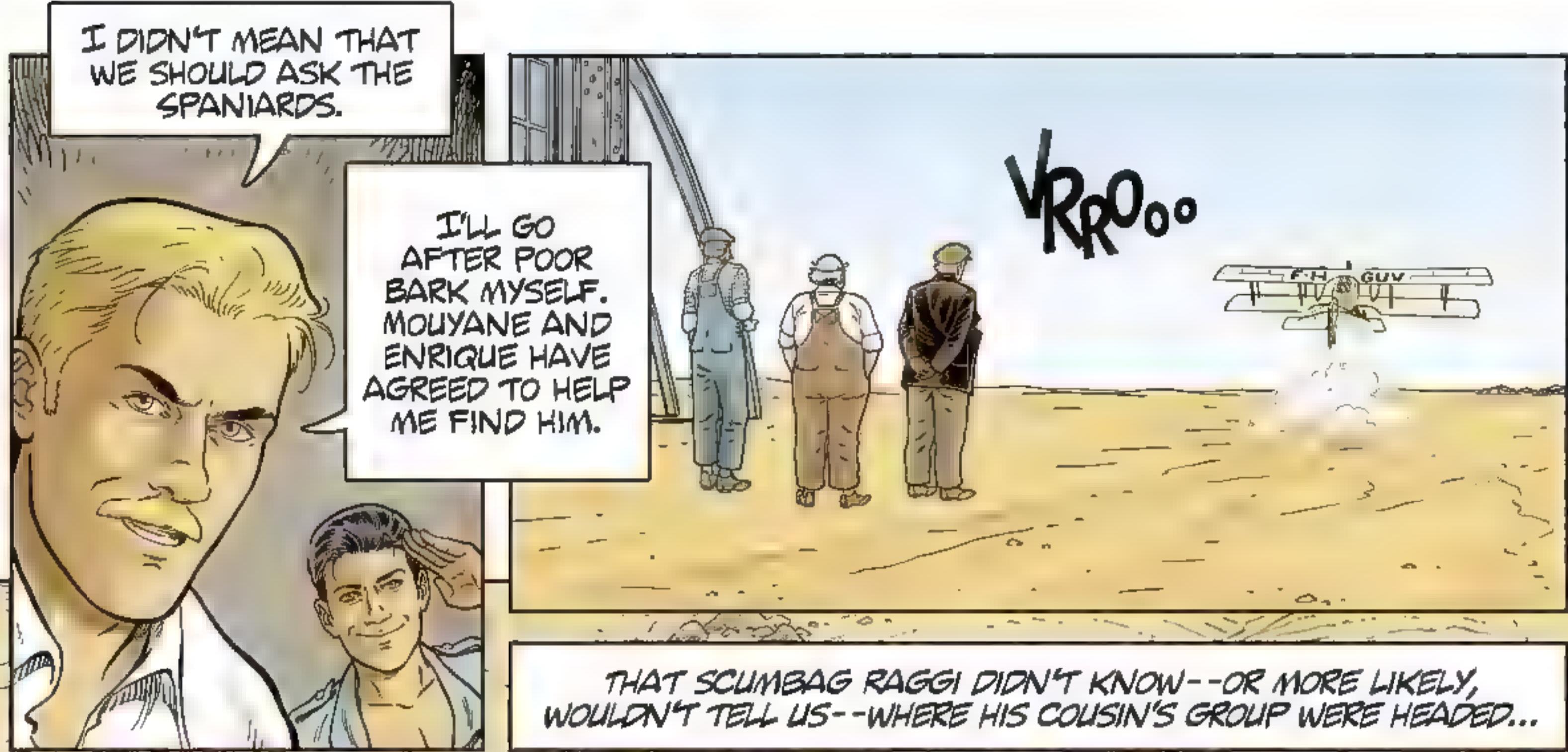
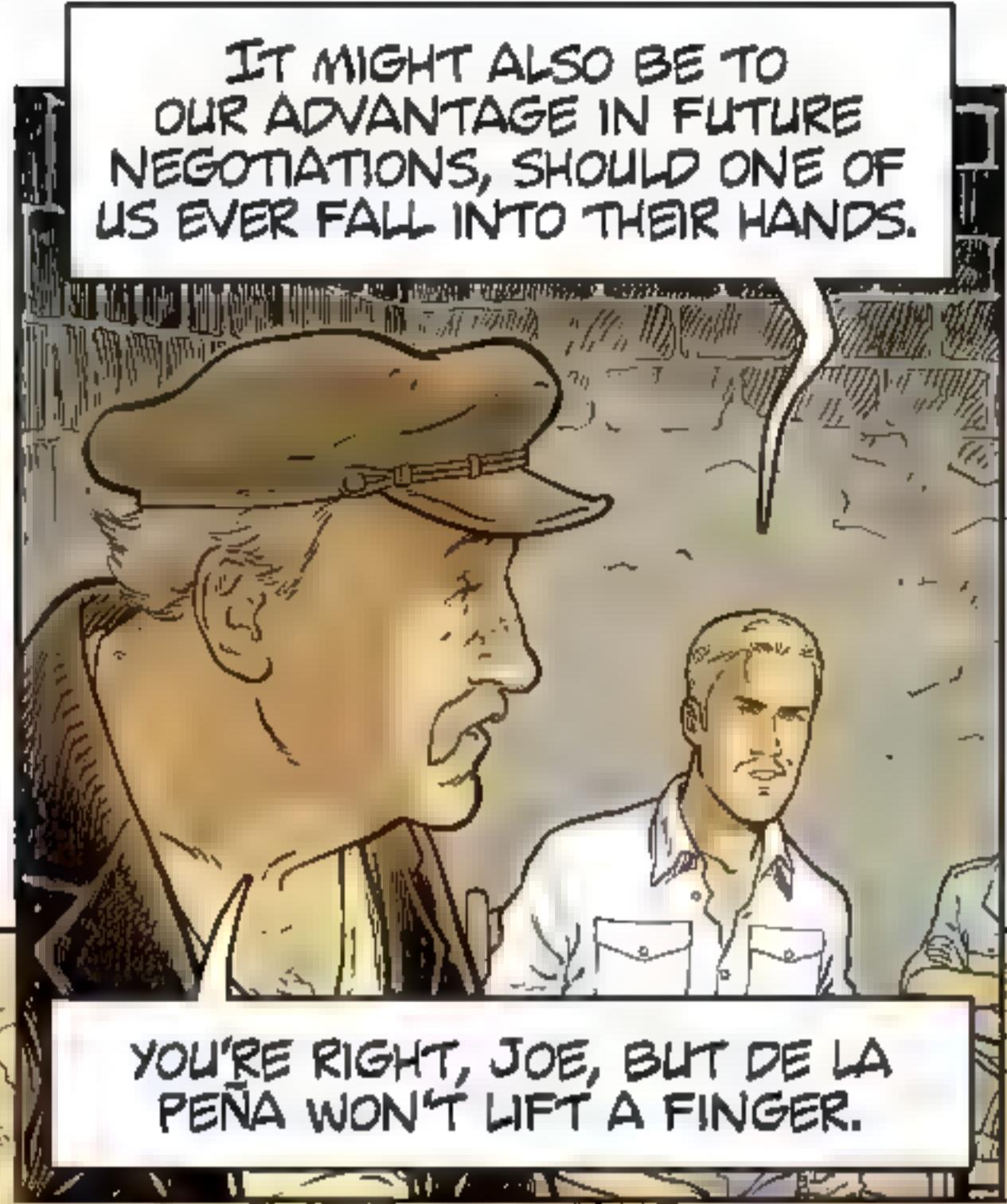
I HAD TO GET RID OF OUR SECRET SPANISH DESERTER AS QUICKLY AS I COULD... AND GET HENRI BOUBA DIOUF AS FAR AWAY FROM HIS FORMER OWNER AS POSSIBLE.

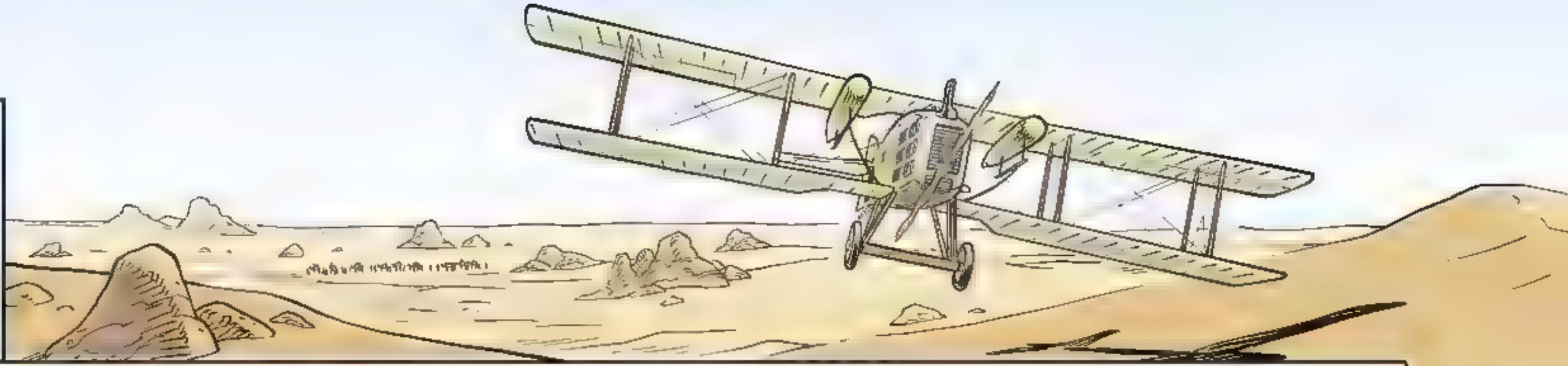
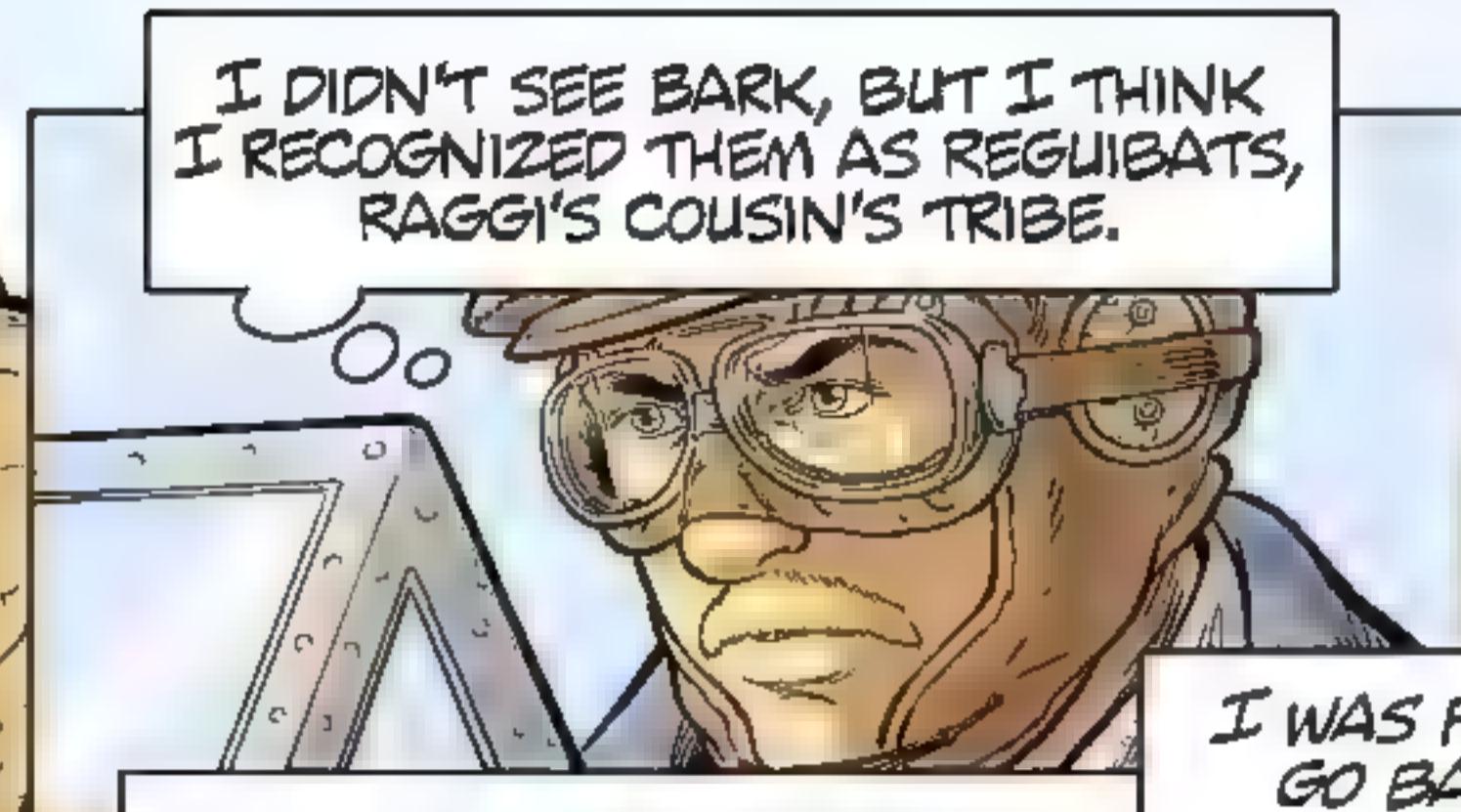




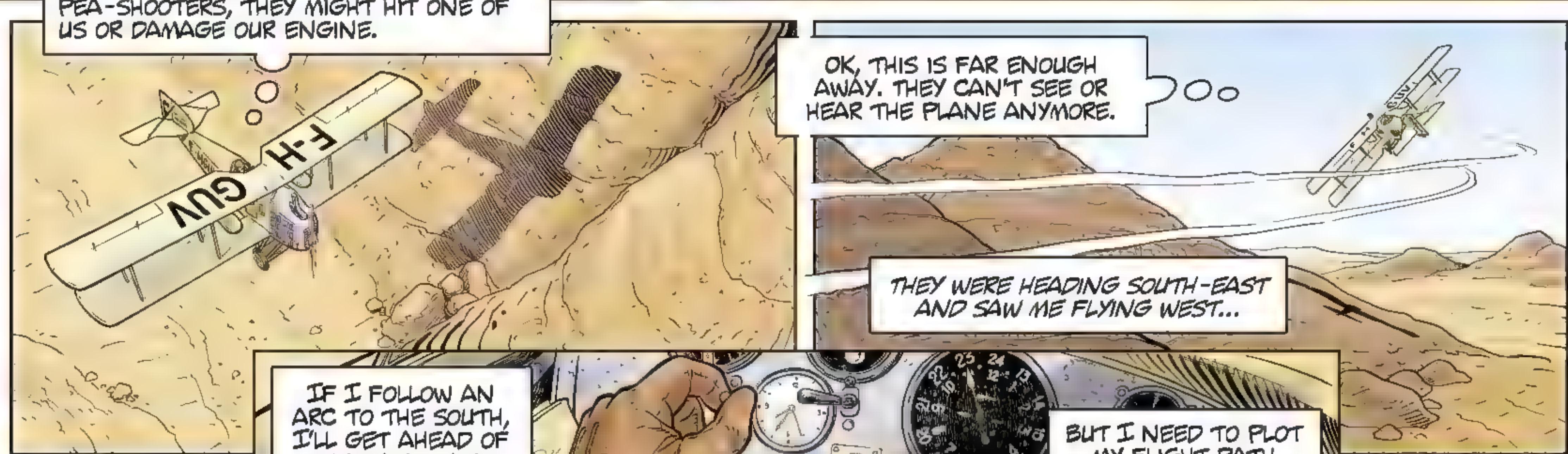
WITH MOUYANE'S HELP, WE DISCOVERED THAT RAGGI OWED MONEY TO A NOMAD COUSIN WHO'D RECENTLY TURNED UP AT CAPE JUBY. NOT HAVING ENOUGH TO REPAY HIM, RAGGI HAD SPOTTED HENRI RISKING A RETURN TO THE CAMP TO SAY GOODBYE TO HIS FRIEND BOUBACAR, AND SEIZED HIS CHANCE.



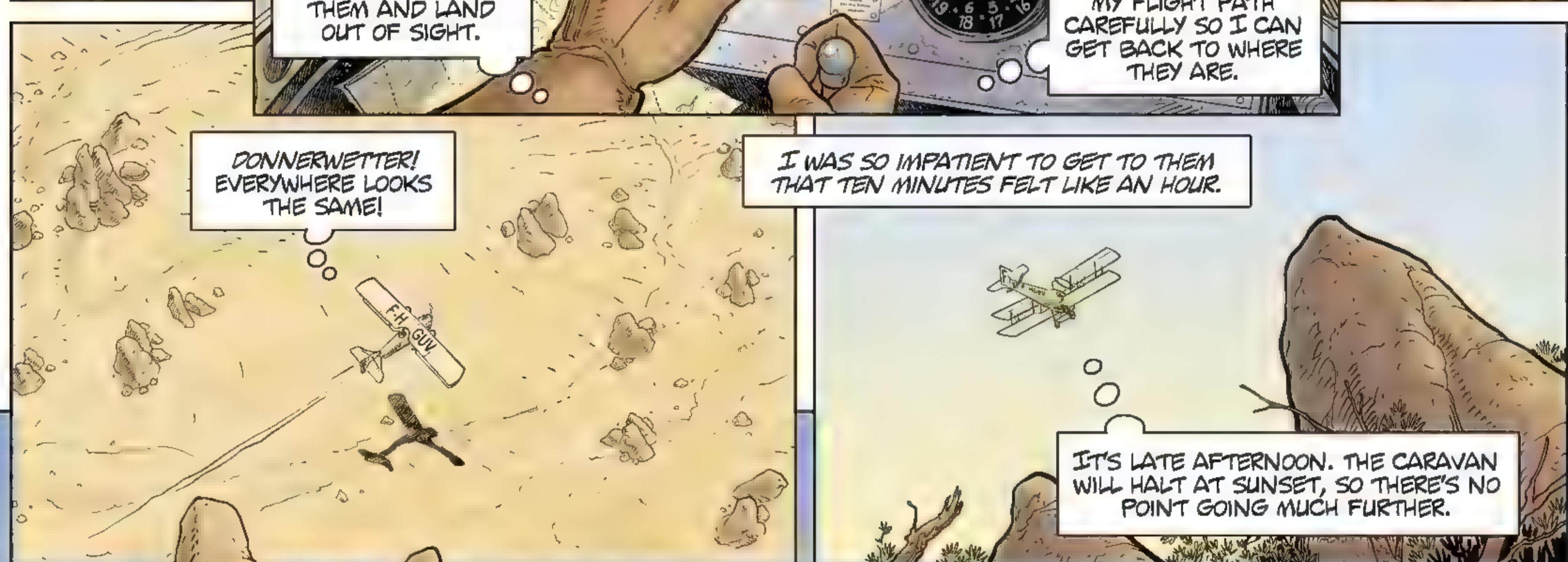




I WAS PRETTY SURE THAT THEY WERE THE ONES WE WERE LOOKING FOR, BUT I WASN'T GOING TO GO BACK AND CHECK. WE'D SURPRISED THEM THE FIRST TIME--NOW THEY'D BE READY FOR US.

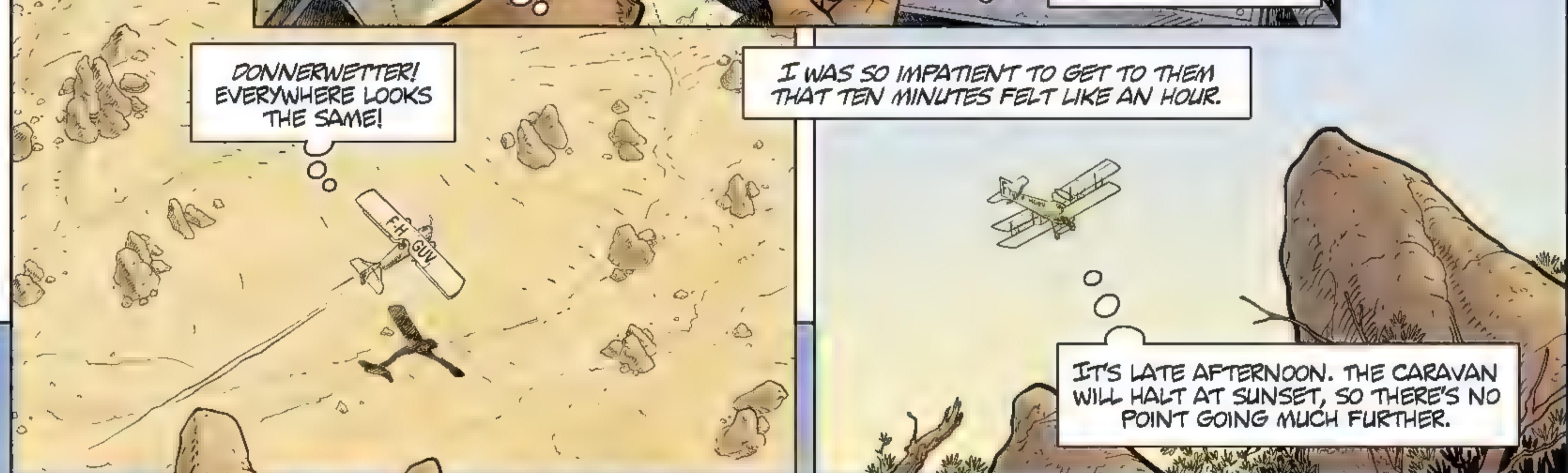


OK, THIS IS FAR ENOUGH AWAY. THEY CAN'T SEE OR HEAR THE PLANE ANYMORE.



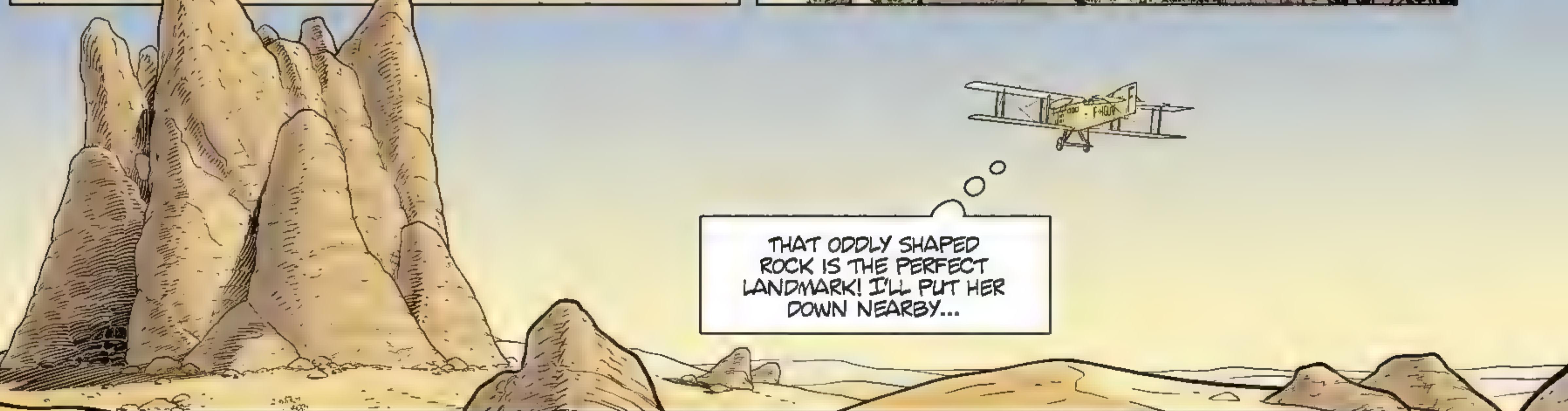
IF I FOLLOW AN ARC TO THE SOUTH, I'LL GET AHEAD OF THEM AND LAND OUT OF SIGHT.

BUT I NEED TO PLOT MY FLIGHT PATH CAREFULLY SO I CAN GET BACK TO WHERE THEY ARE.

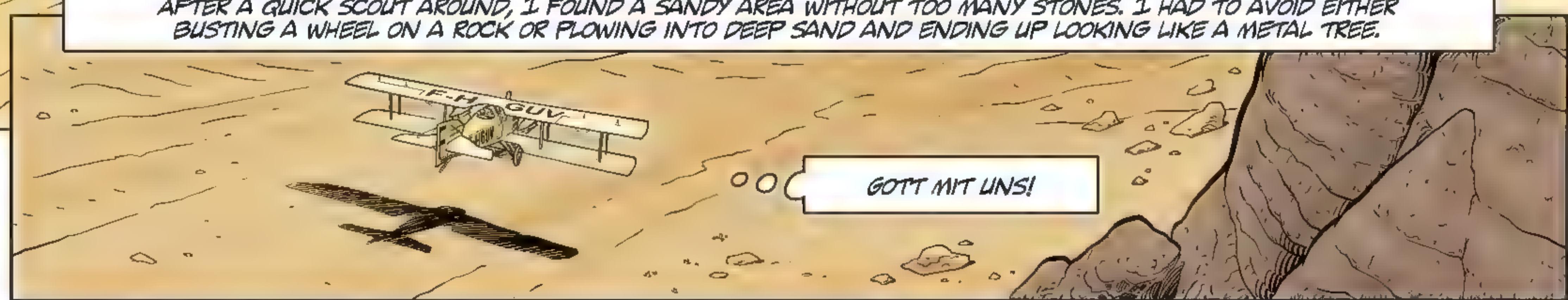


I WAS SO IMPATIENT TO GET TO THEM THAT TEN MINUTES FELT LIKE AN HOUR.

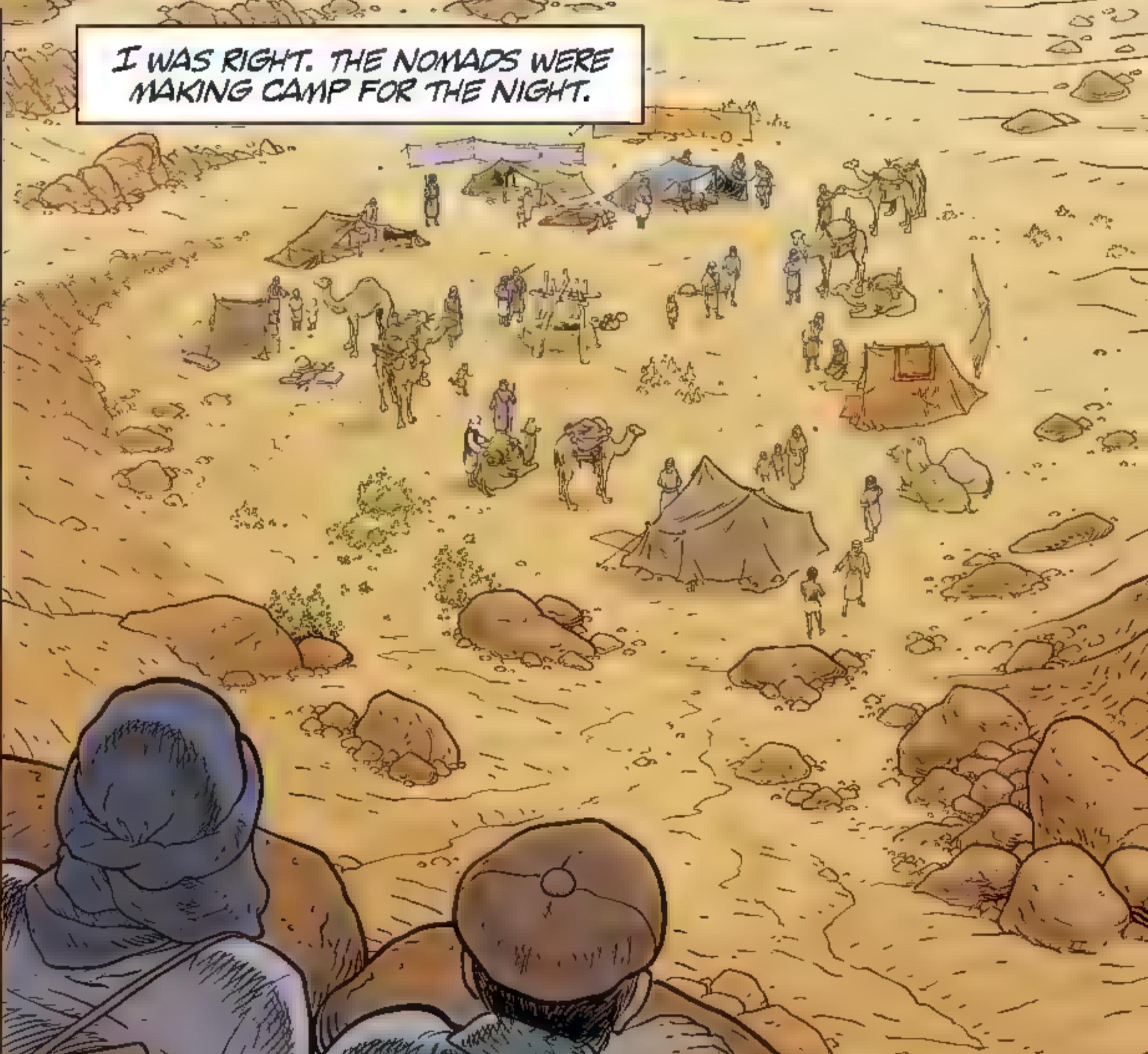
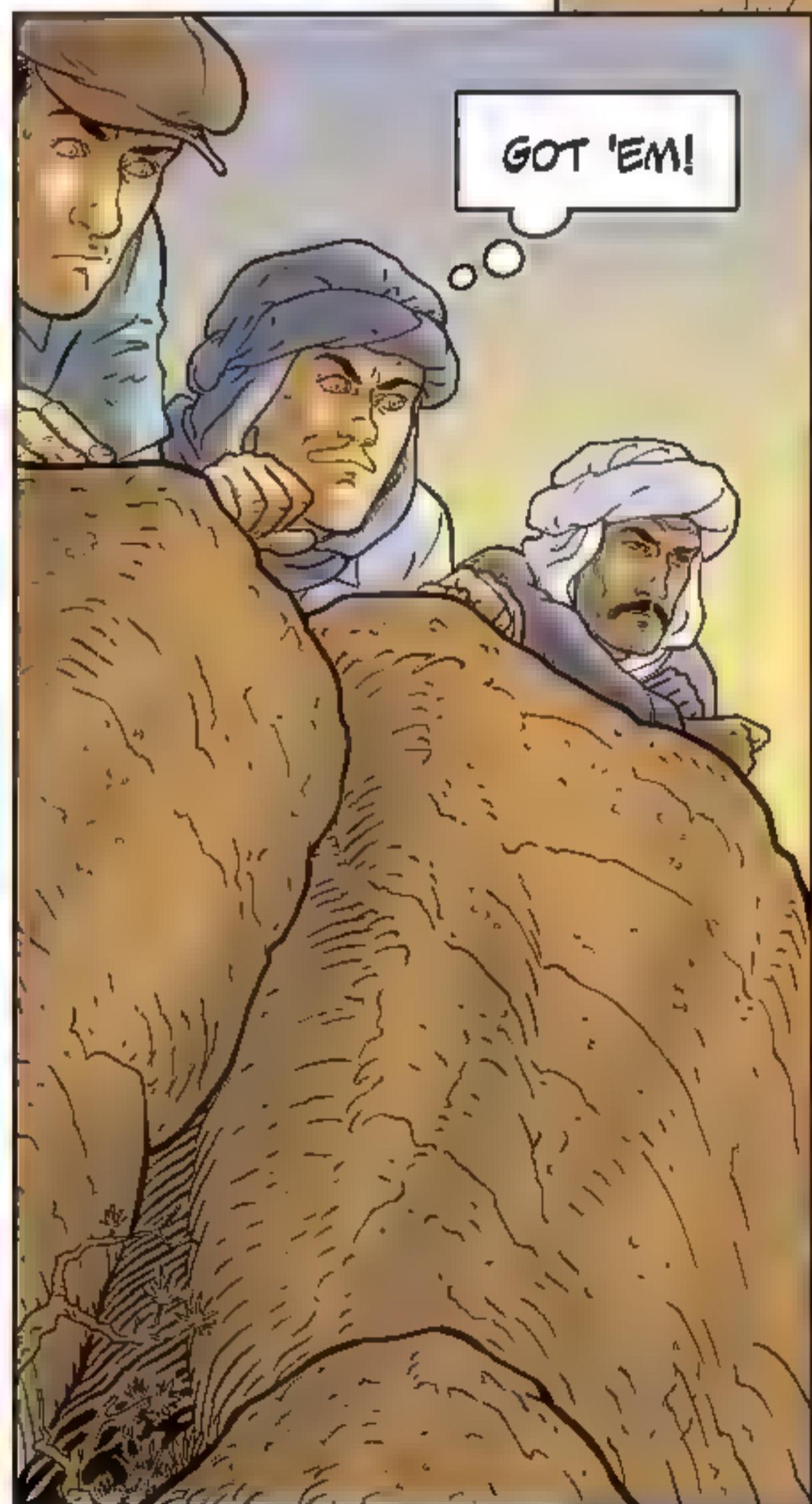
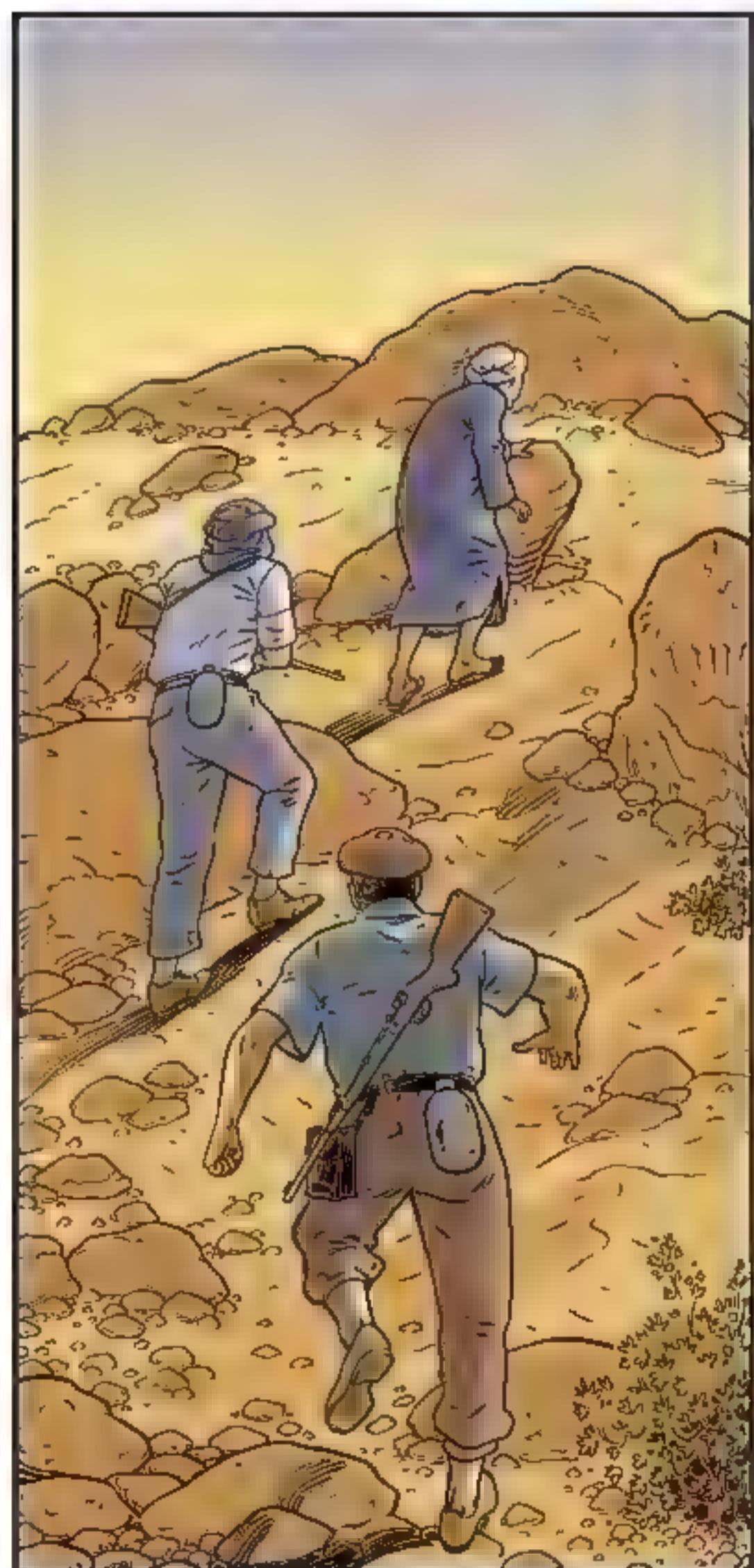
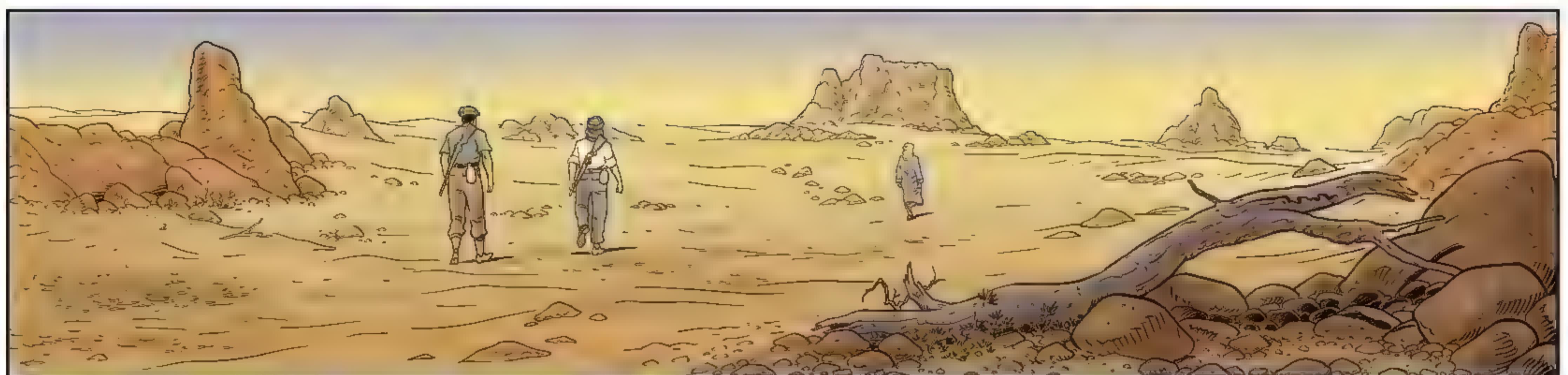
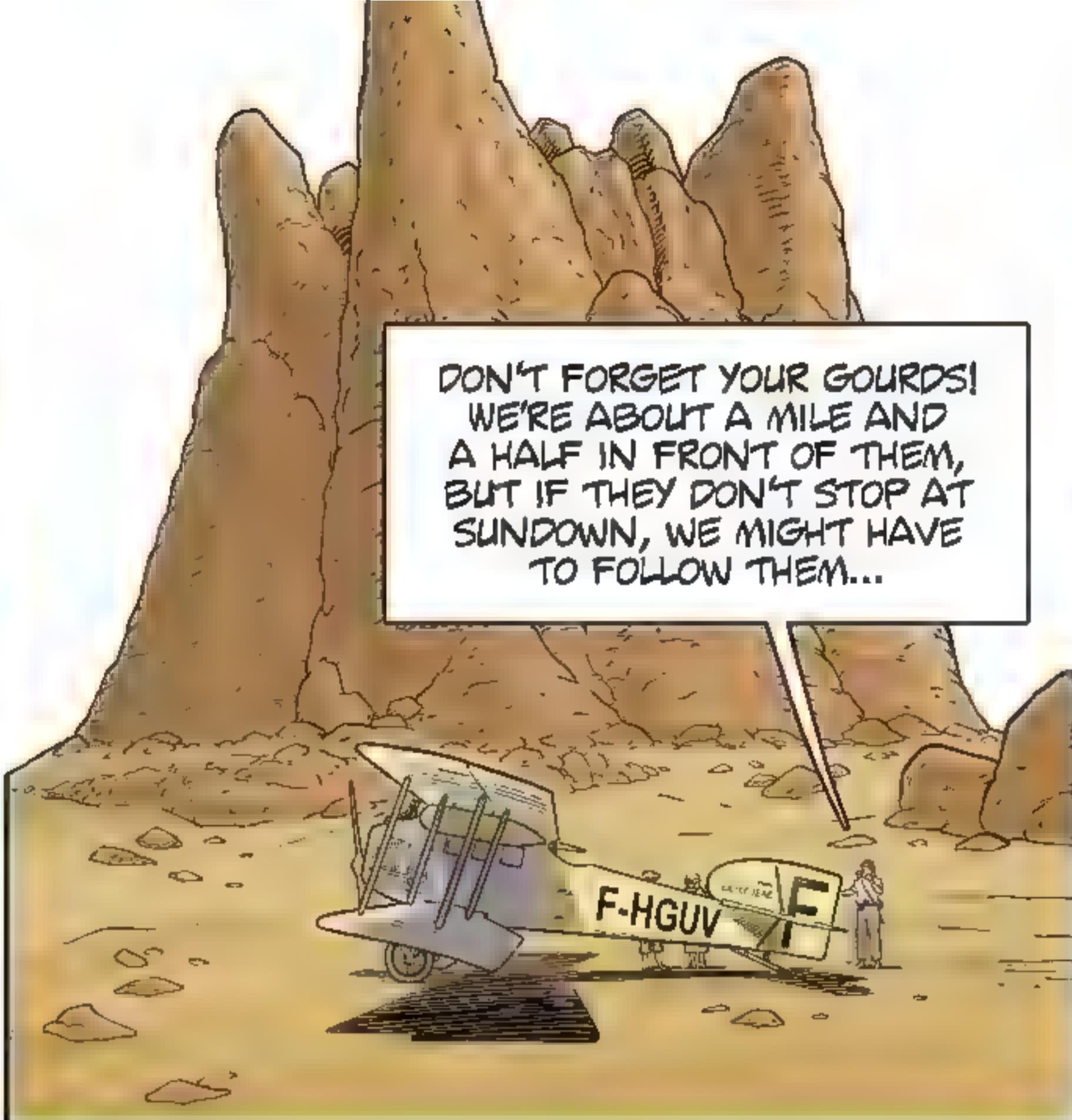
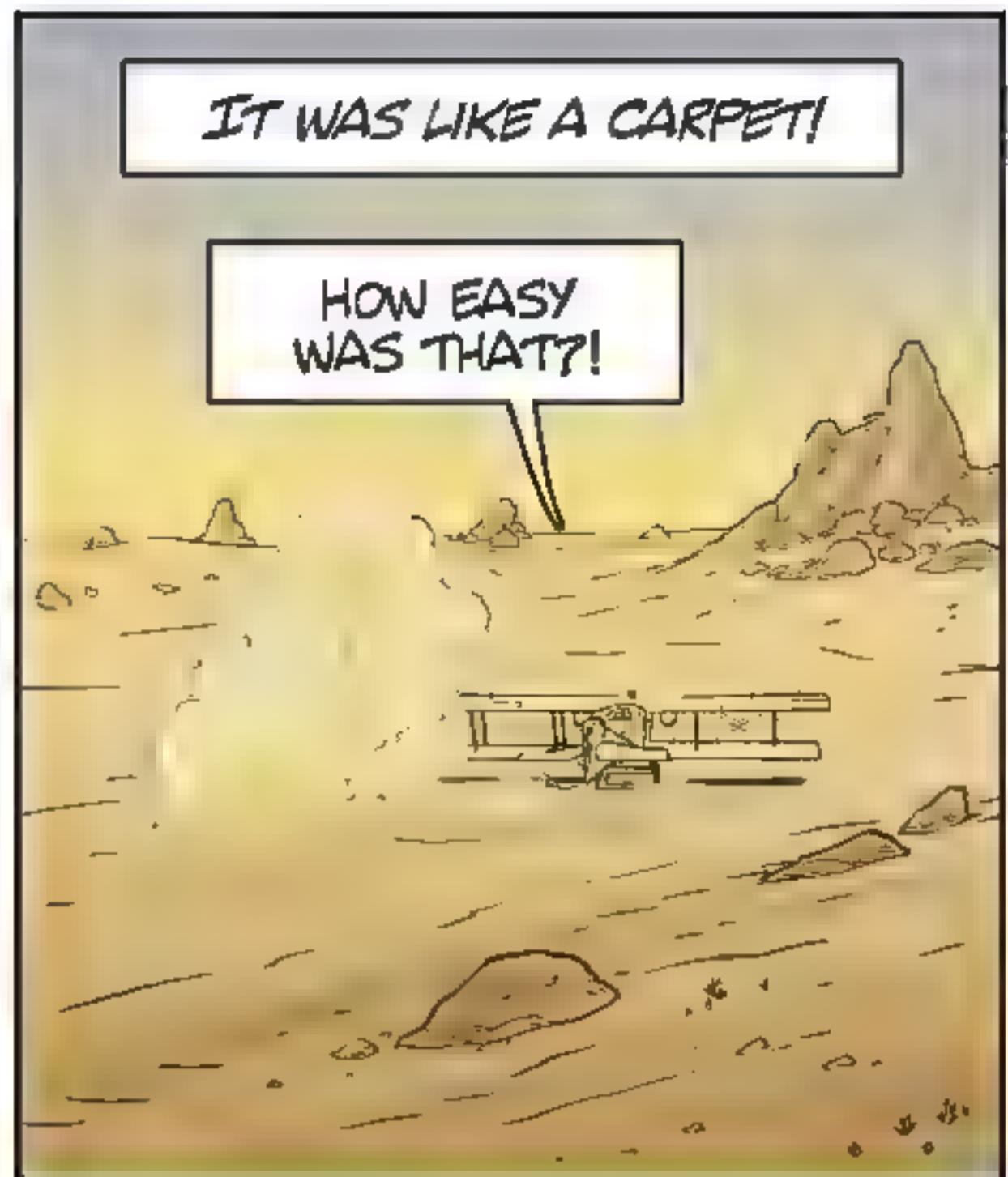
IT'S LATE AFTERNOON. THE CARAVAN WILL HALT AT SUNSET, SO THERE'S NO POINT GOING MUCH FURTHER.

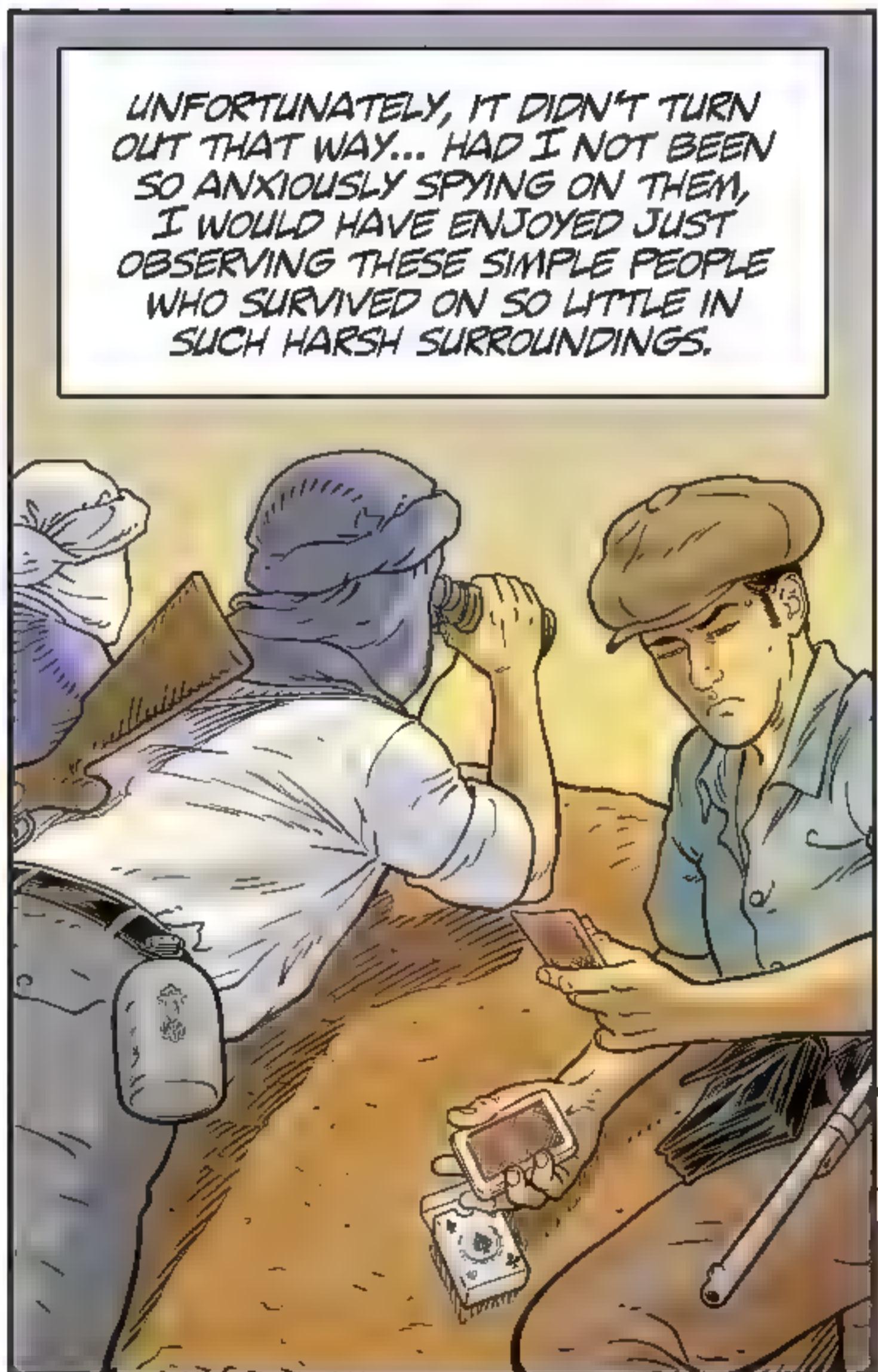
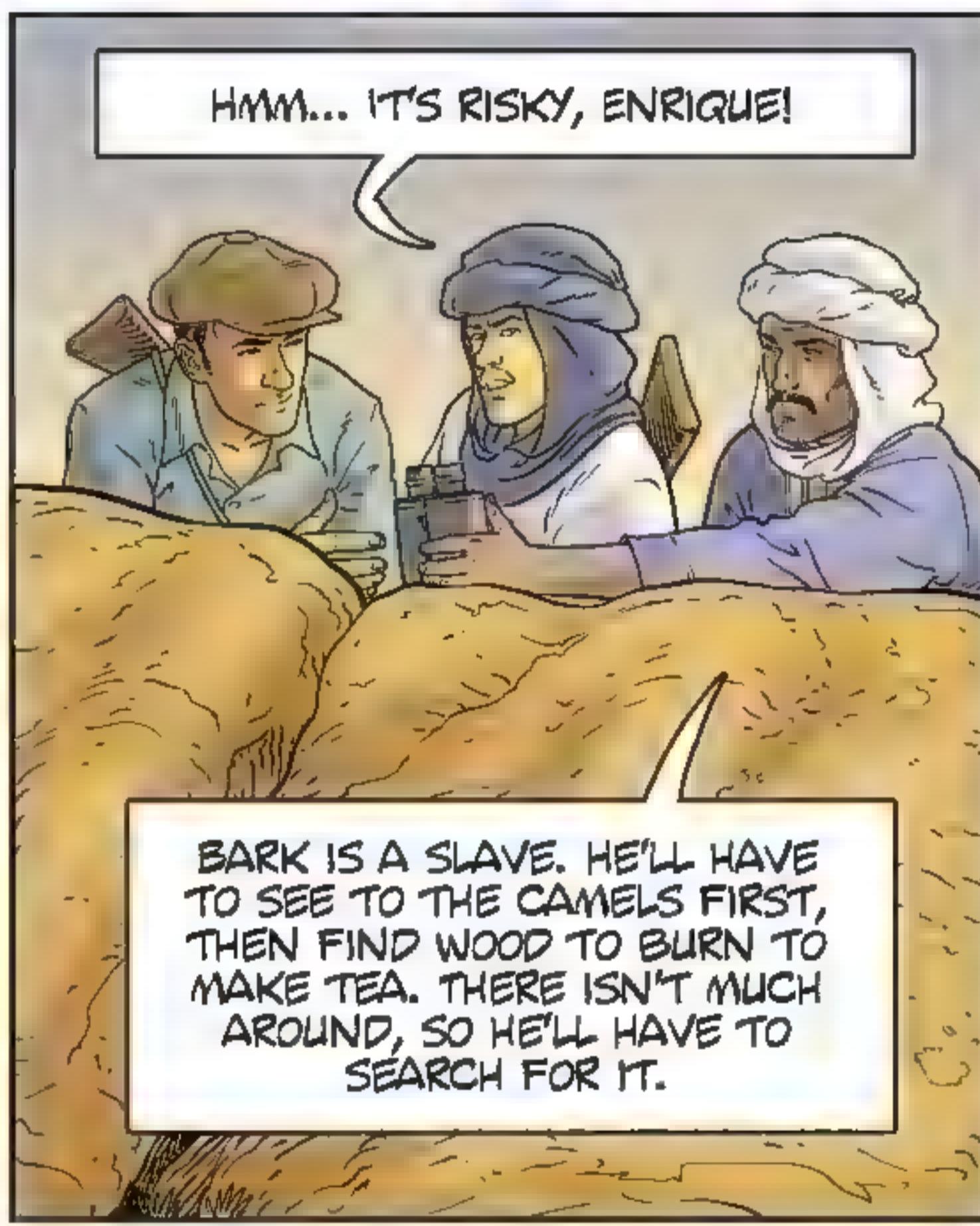
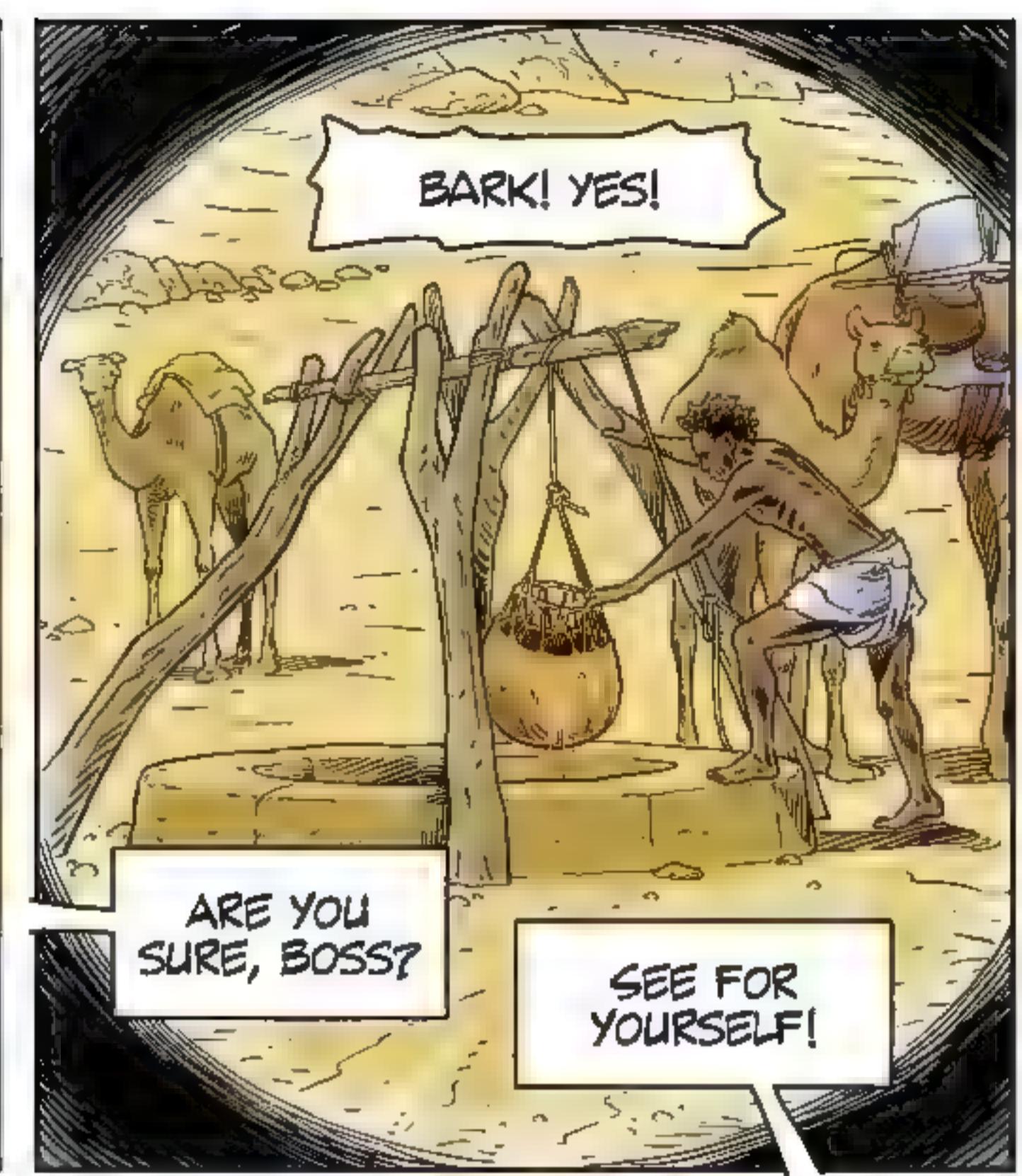


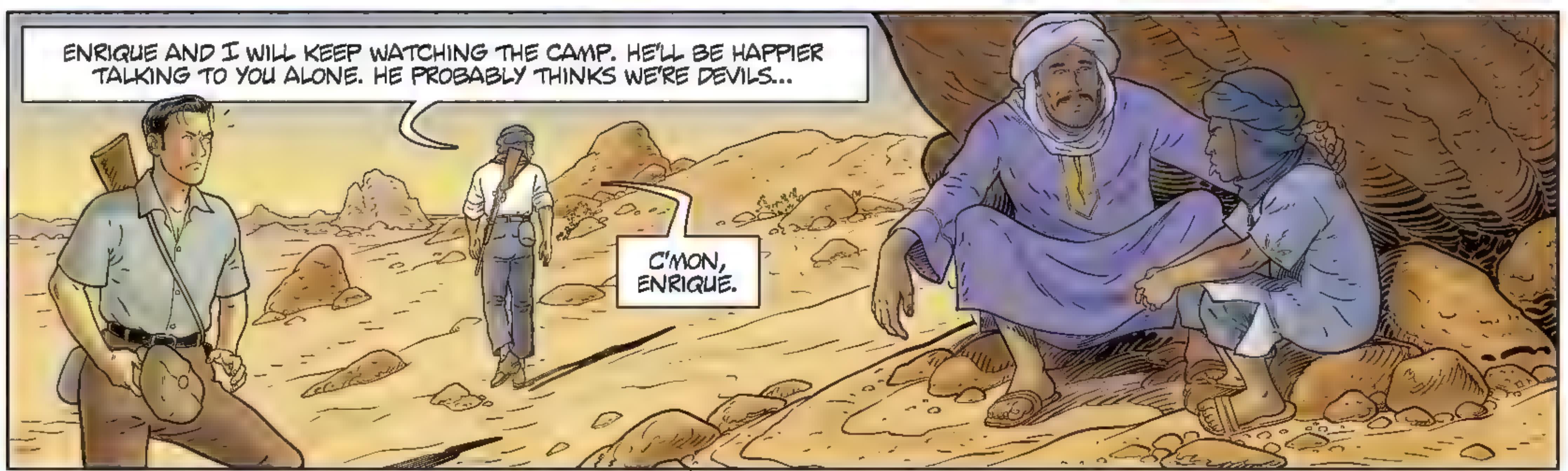
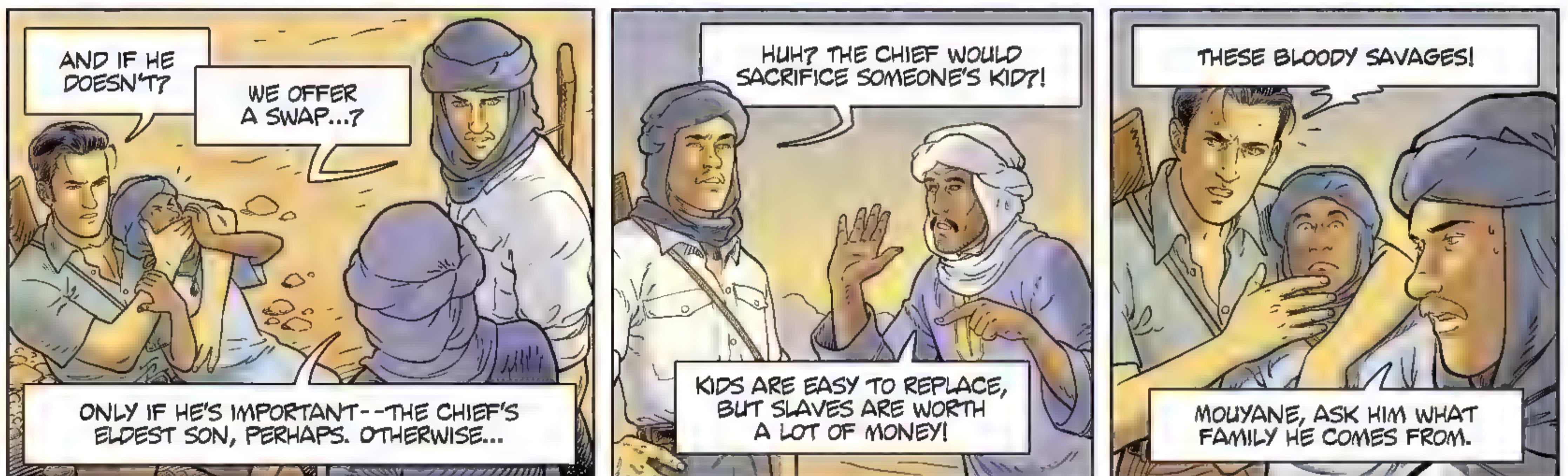
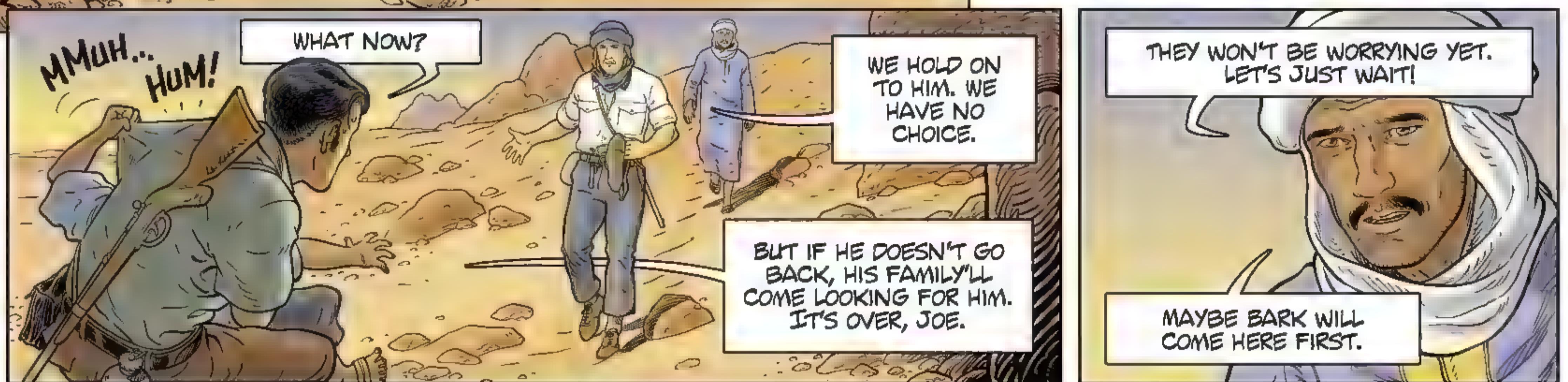
AFTER A QUICK SCOUT AROUND, I FOUND A SANDY AREA WITHOUT TOO MANY STONES. I HAD TO AVOID EITHER BUSTING A WHEEL ON A ROCK OR PLOWING INTO DEEP SAND AND ENDING UP LOOKING LIKE A METAL TREE.

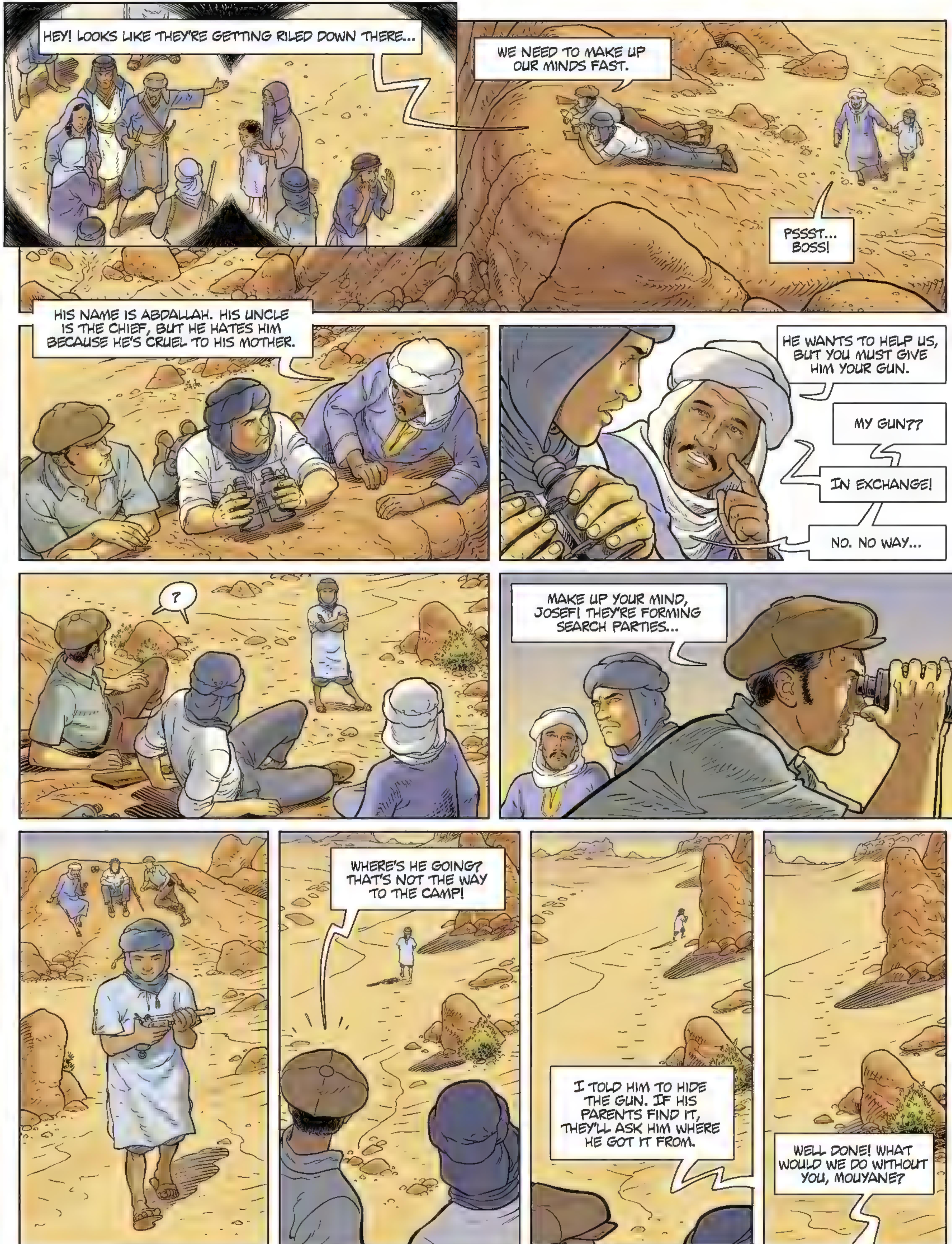


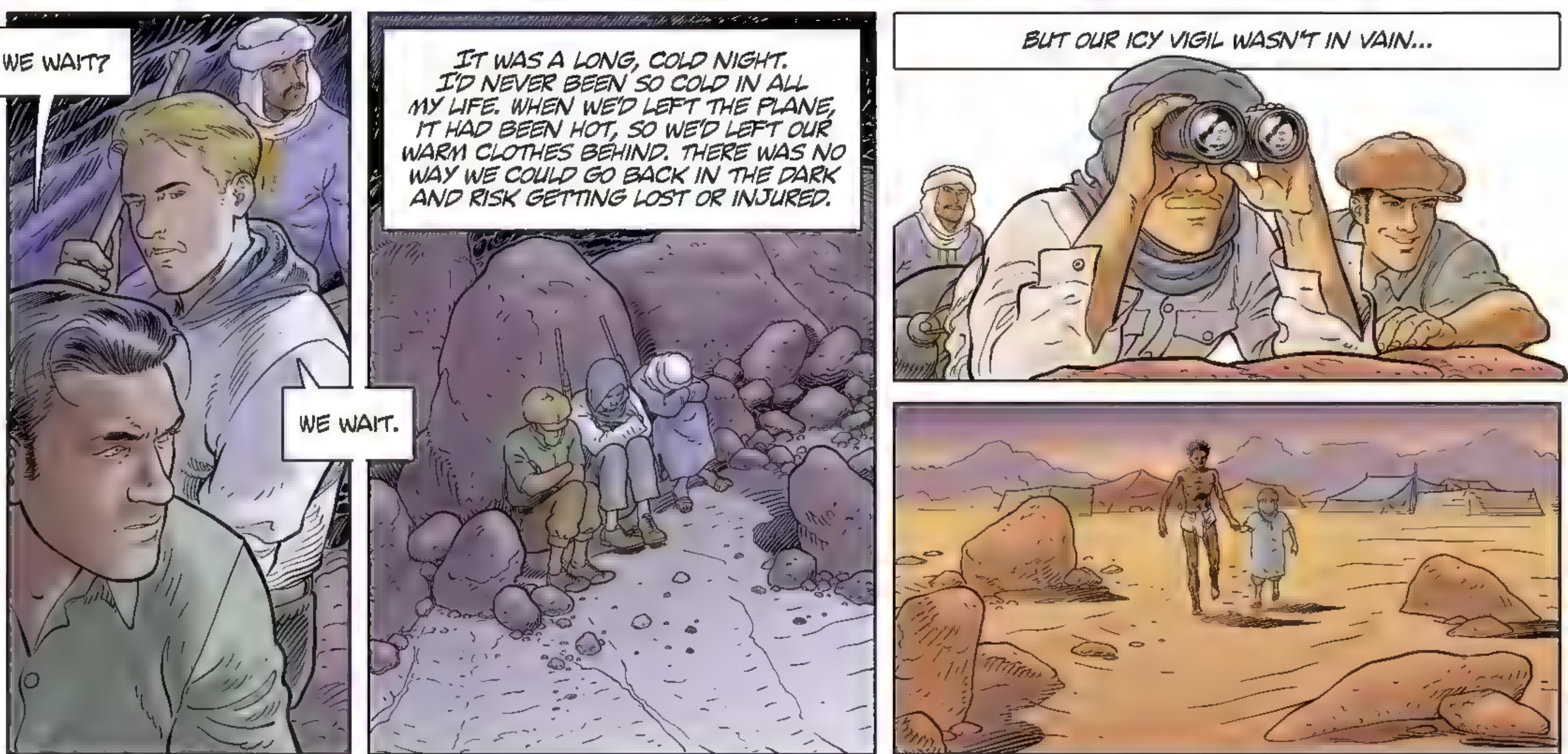
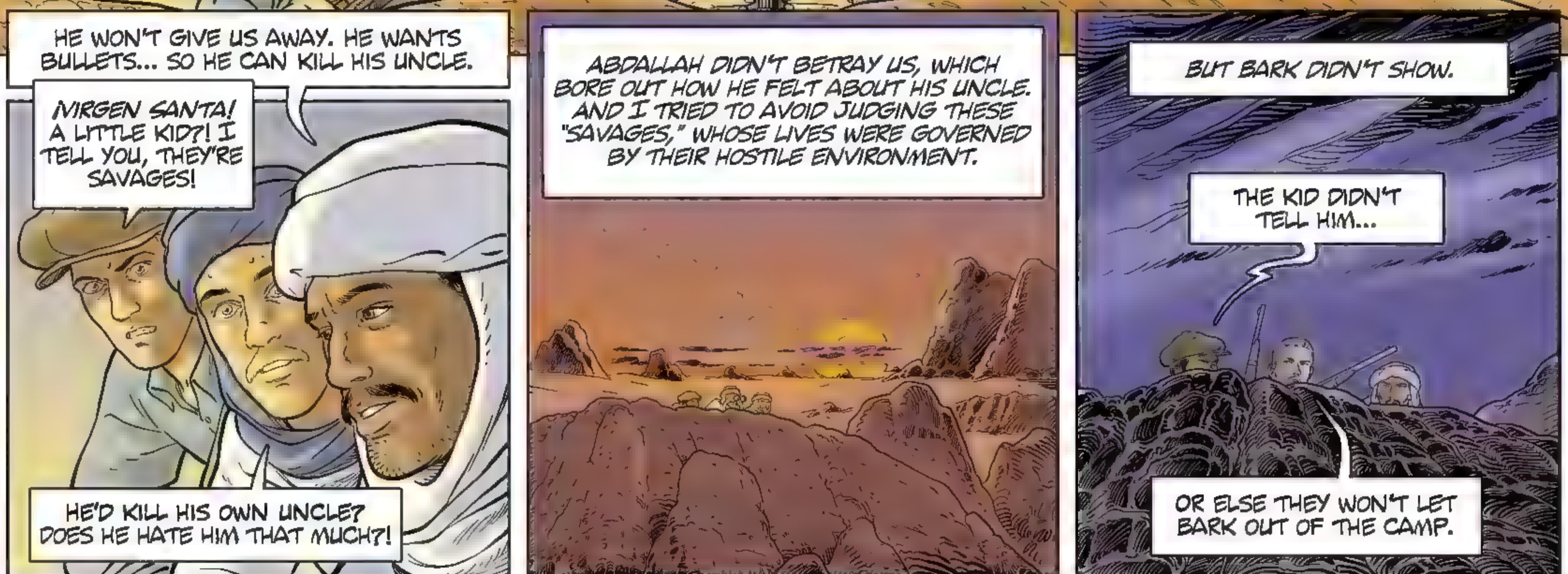
GOTT MIT UNS!

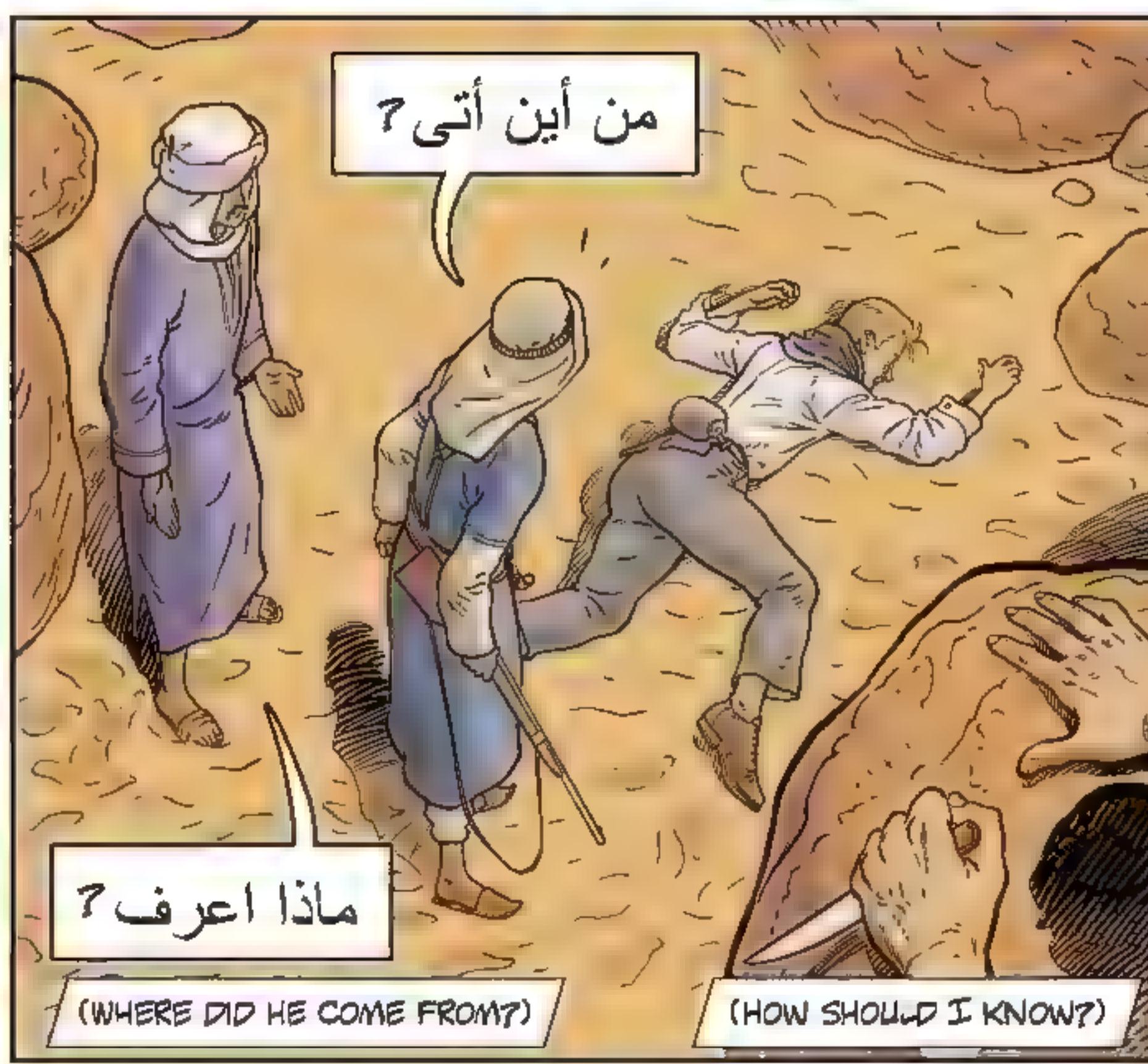
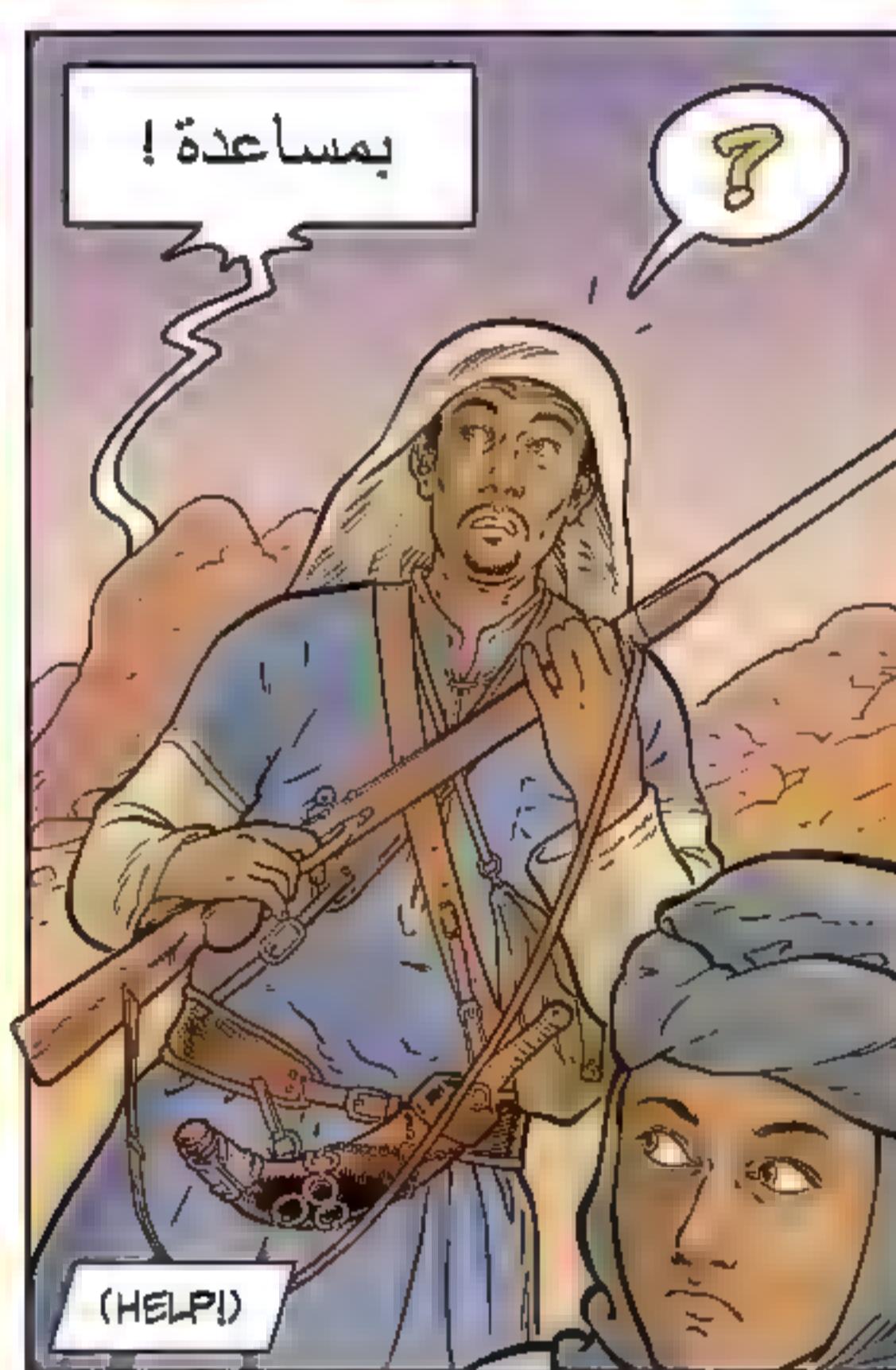
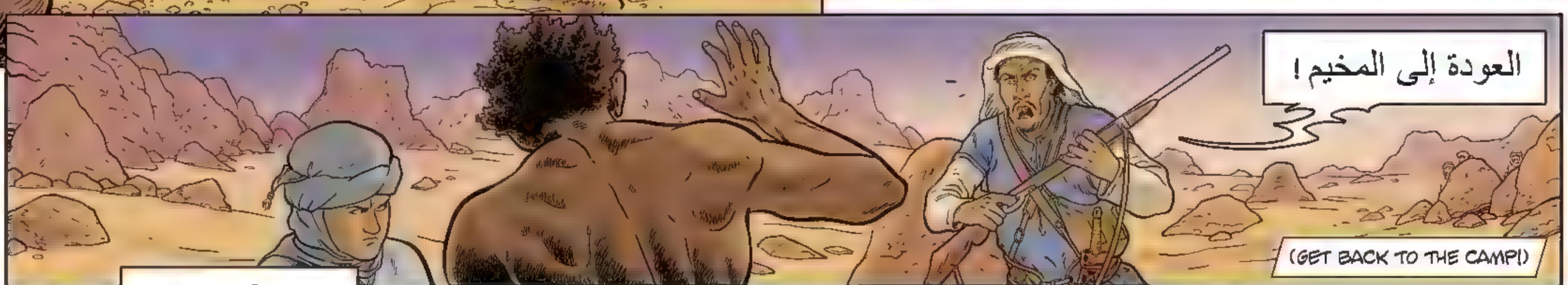
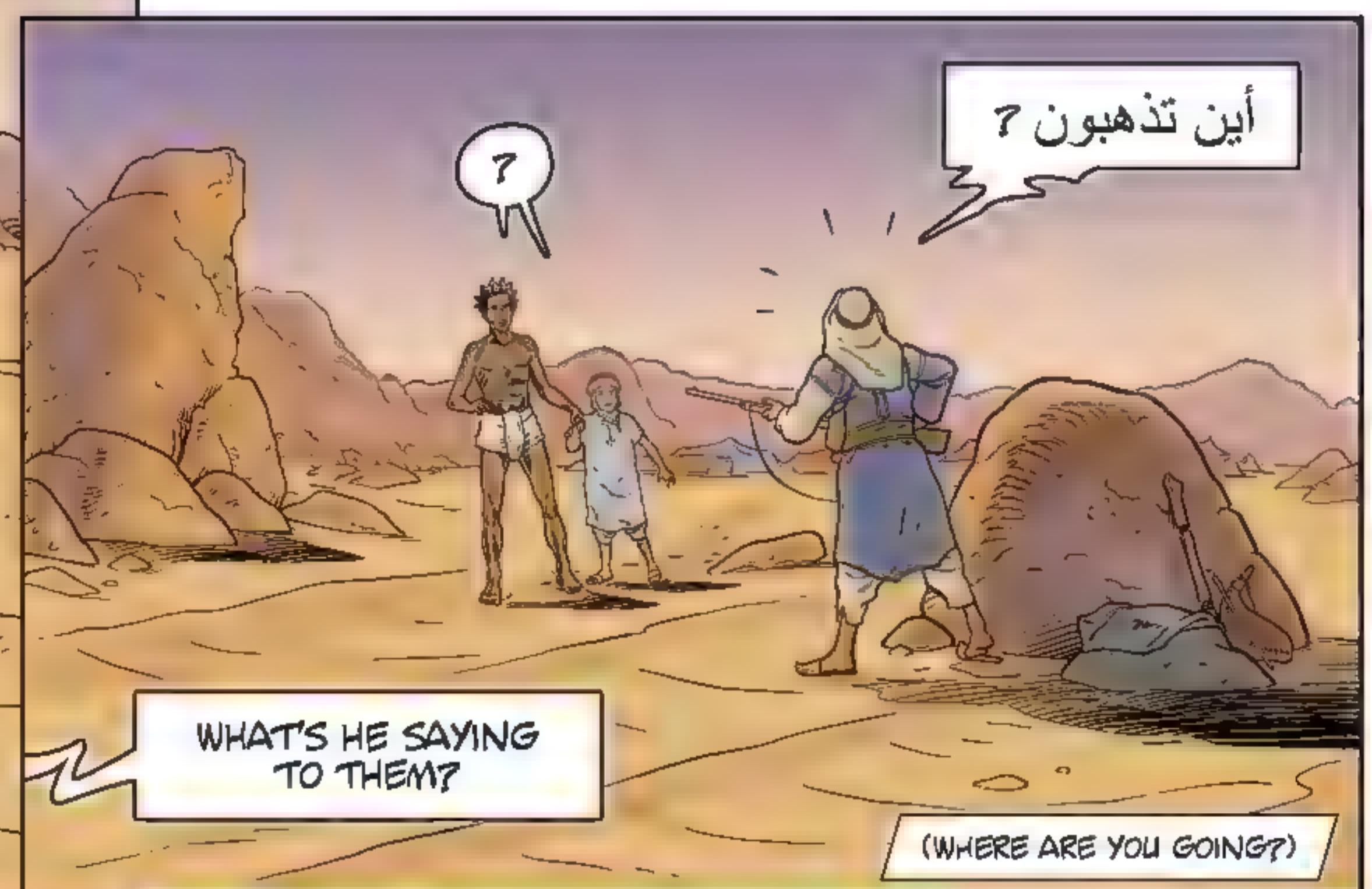
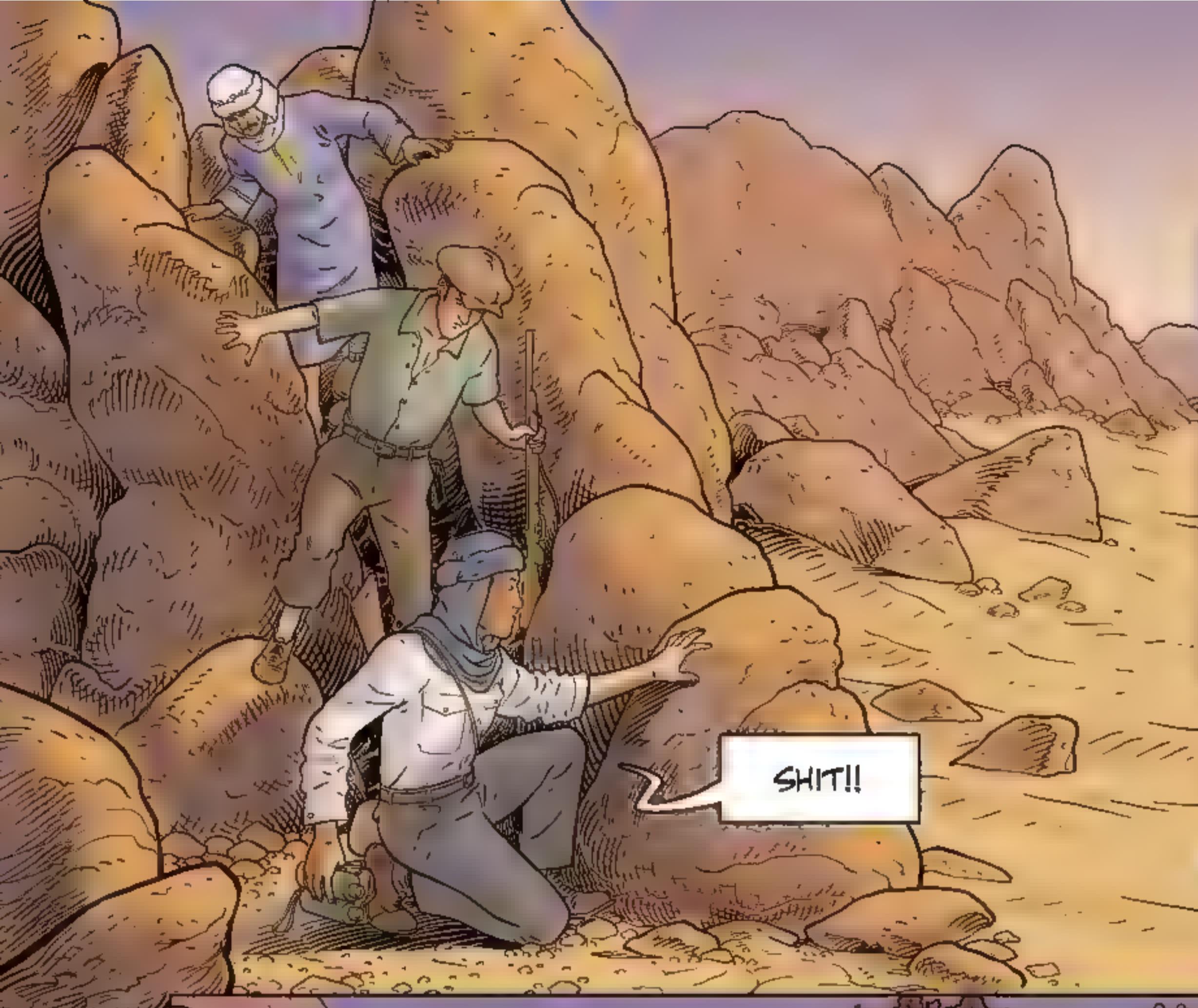


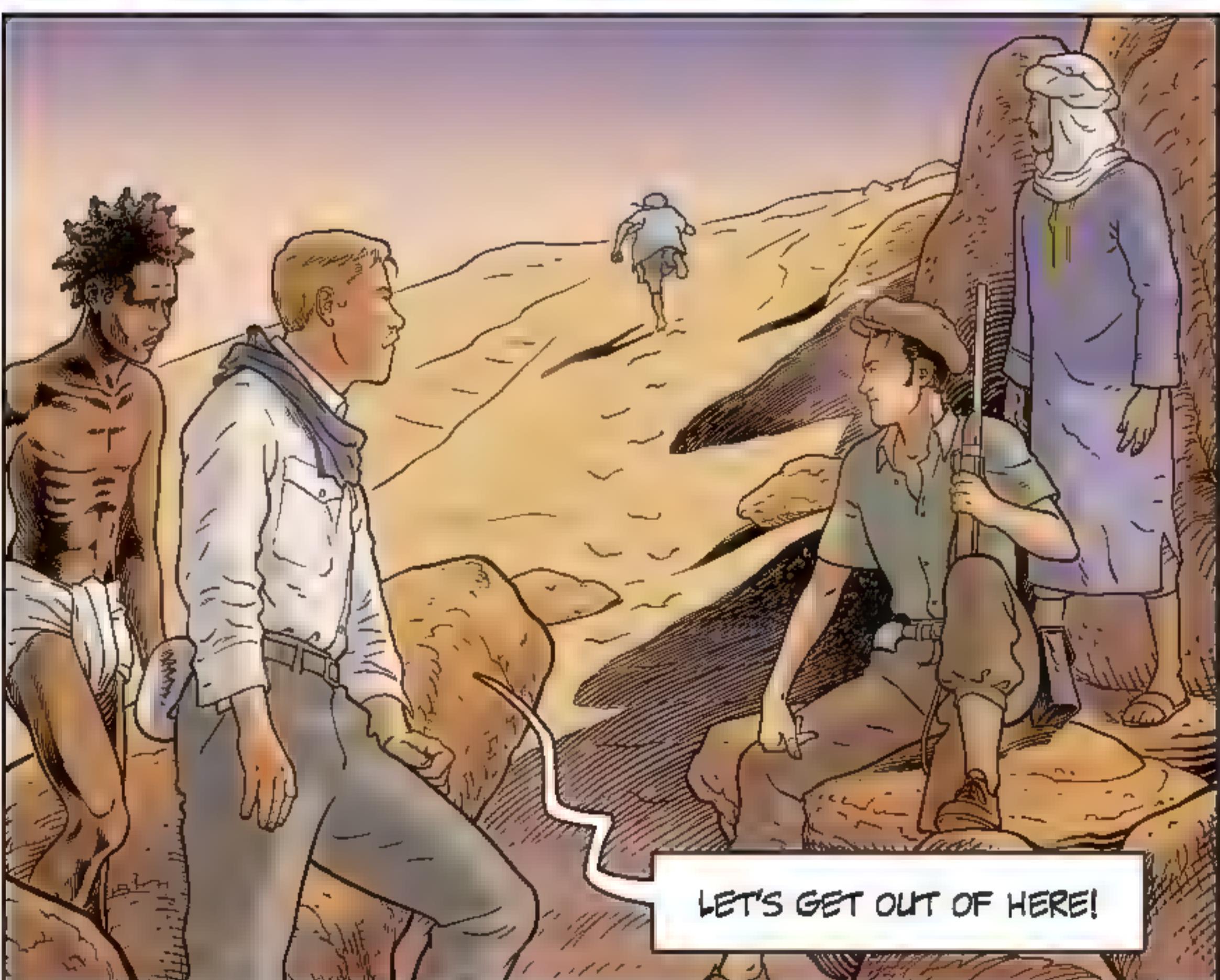
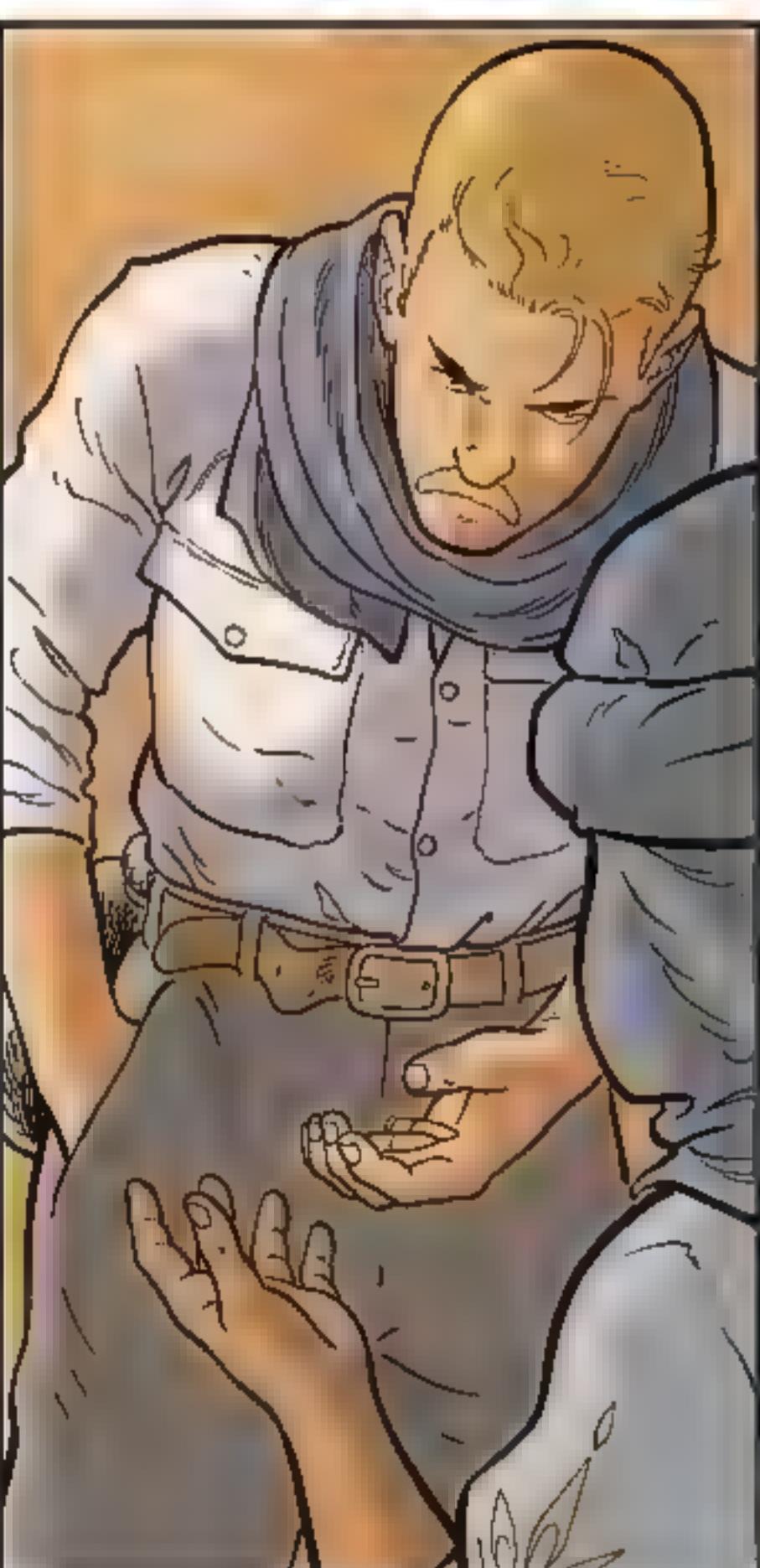
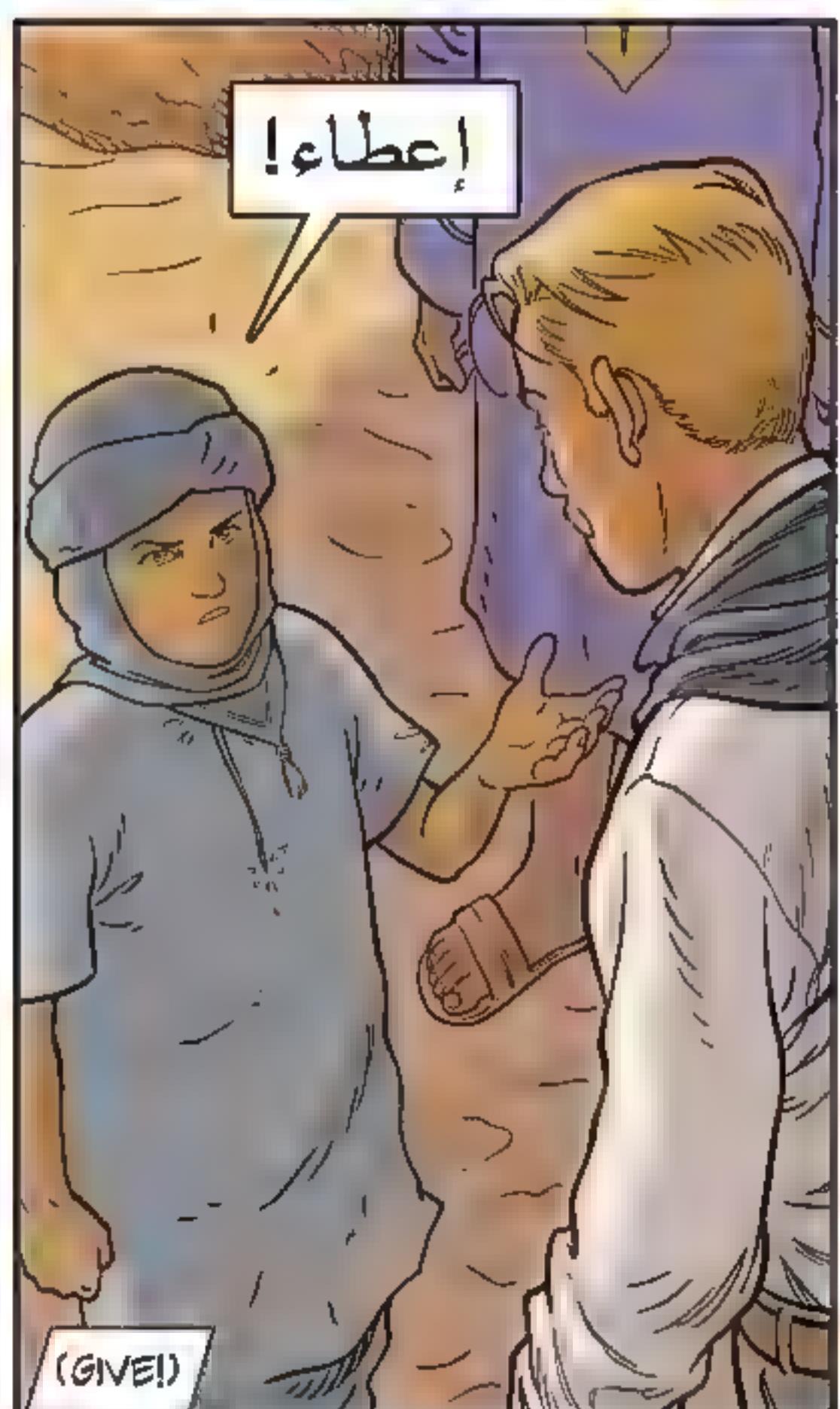
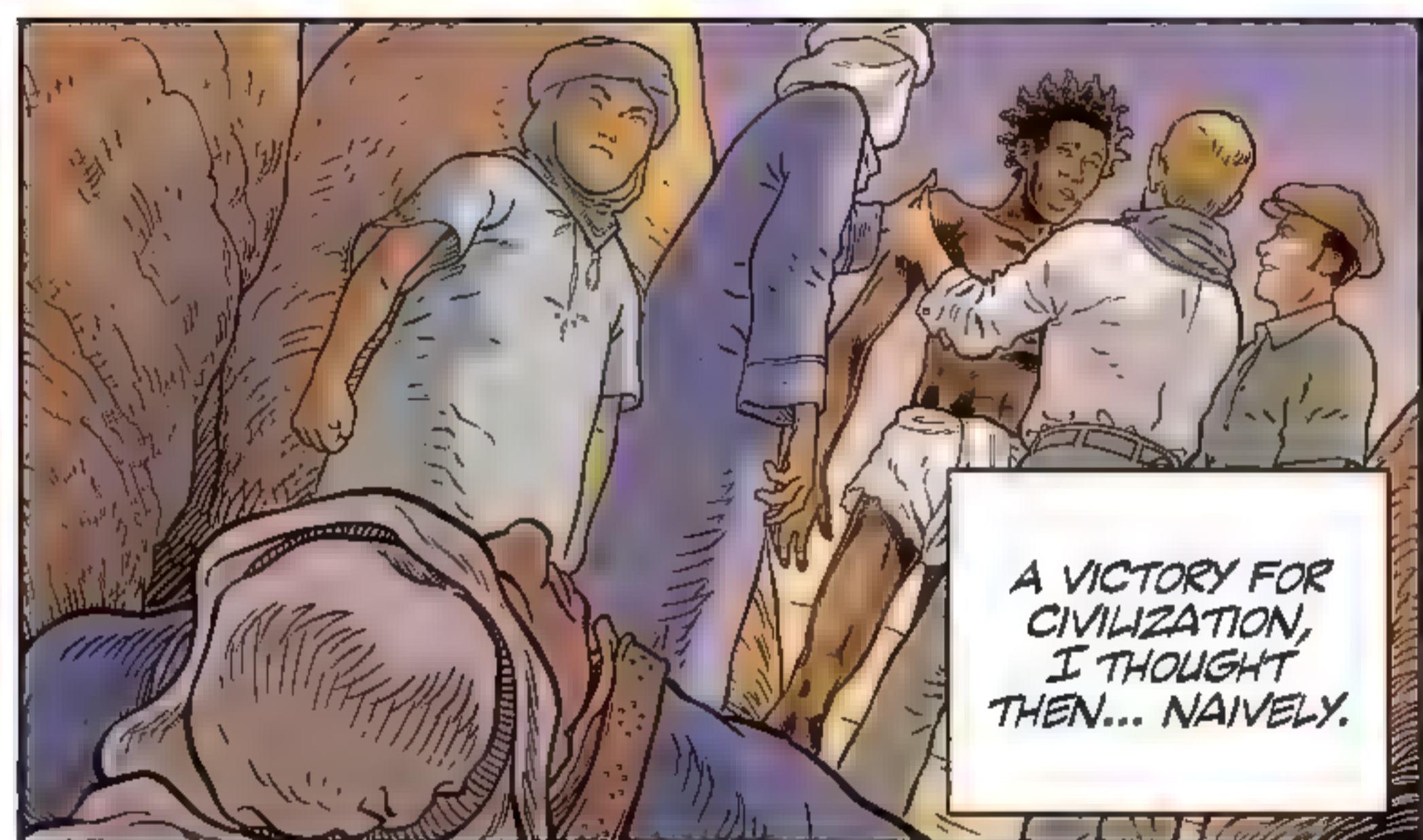
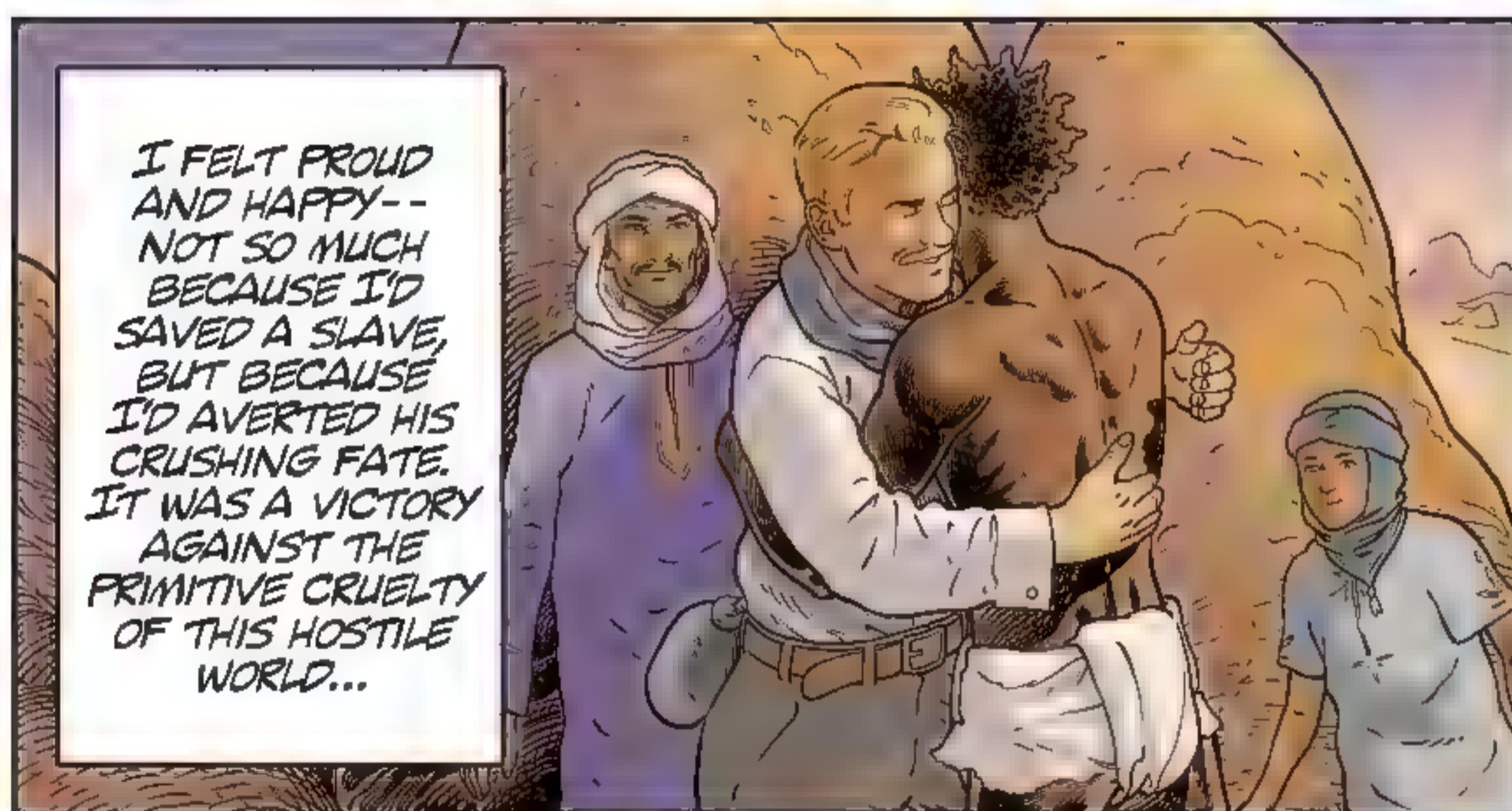
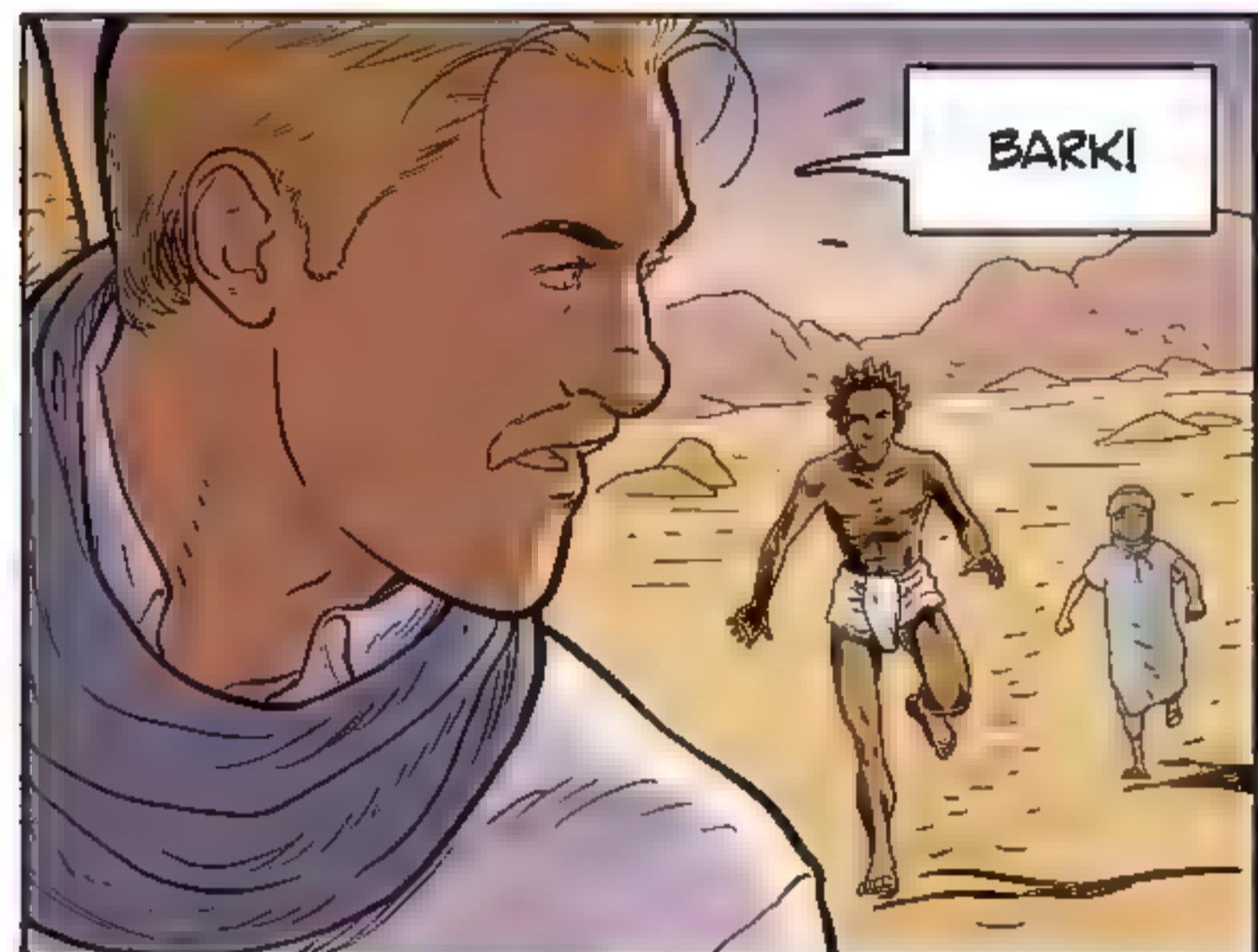
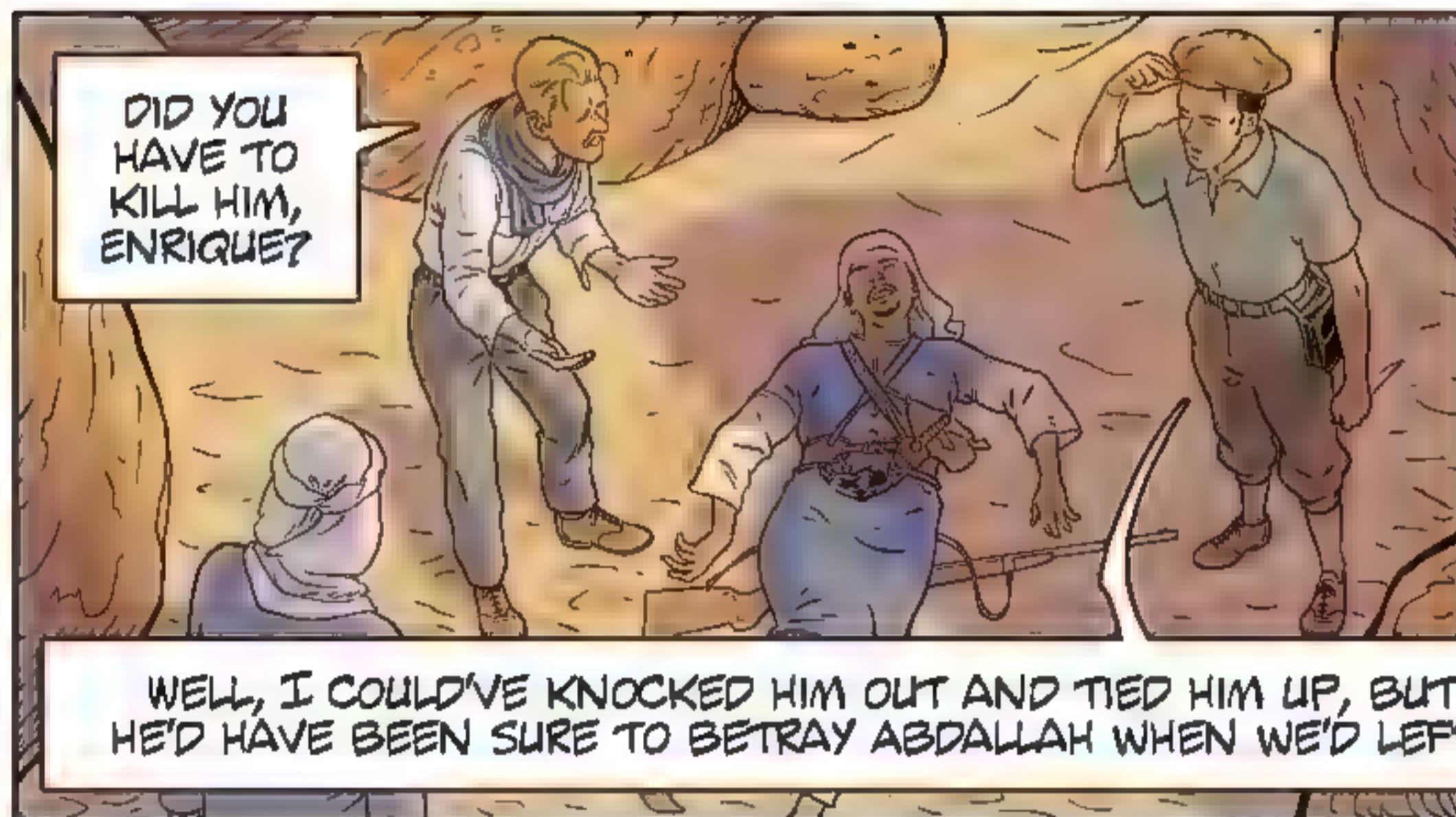
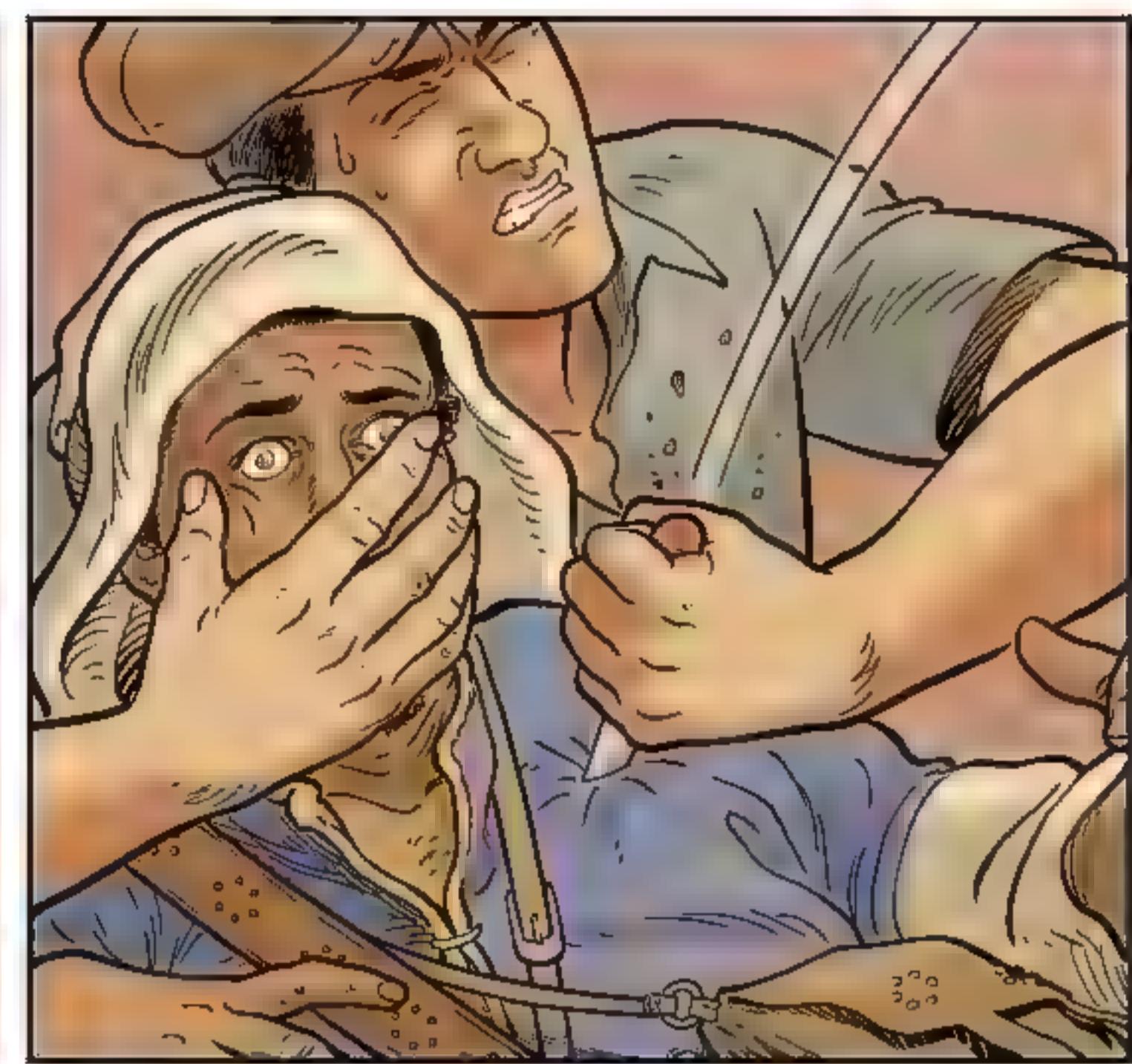
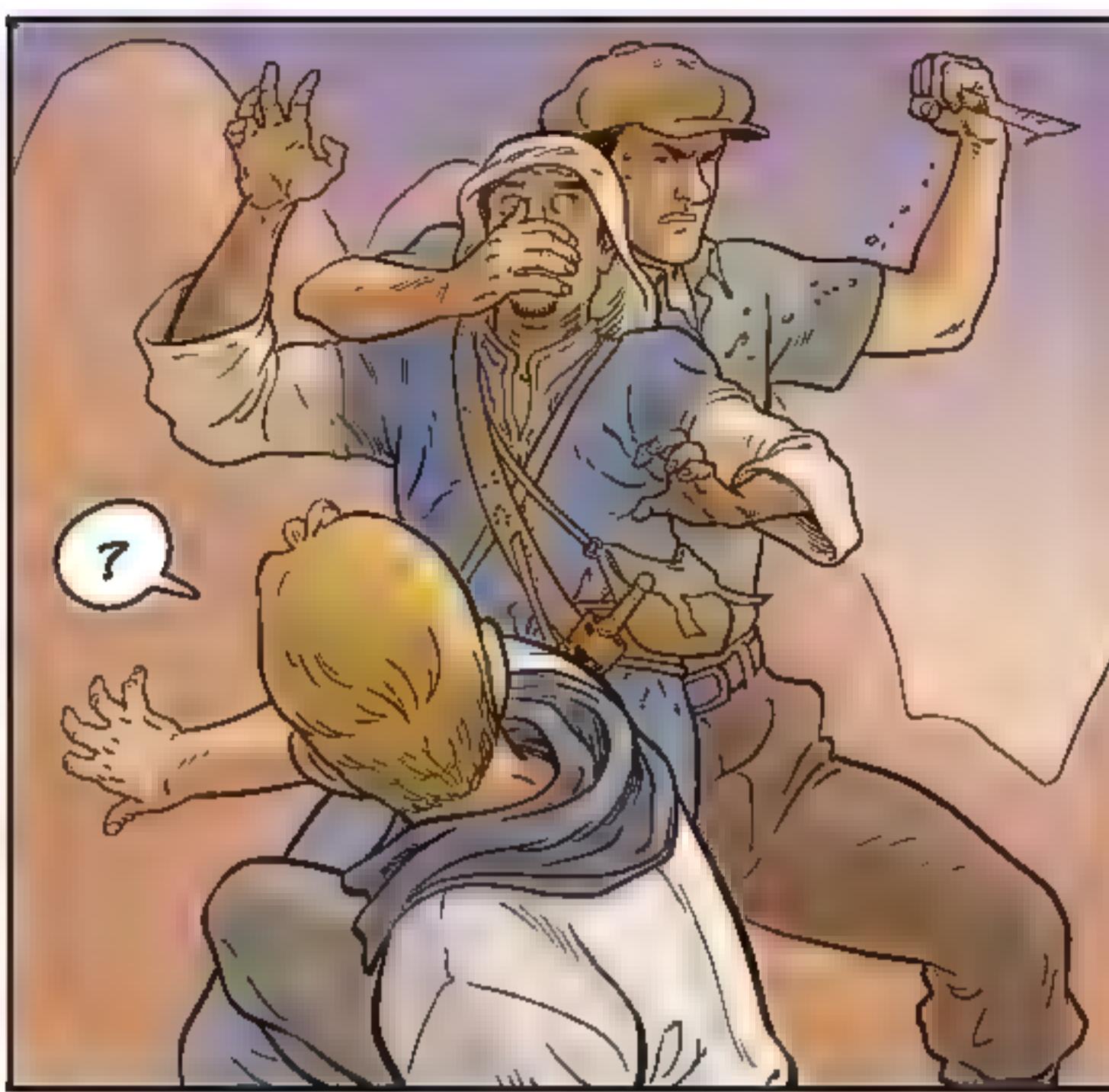


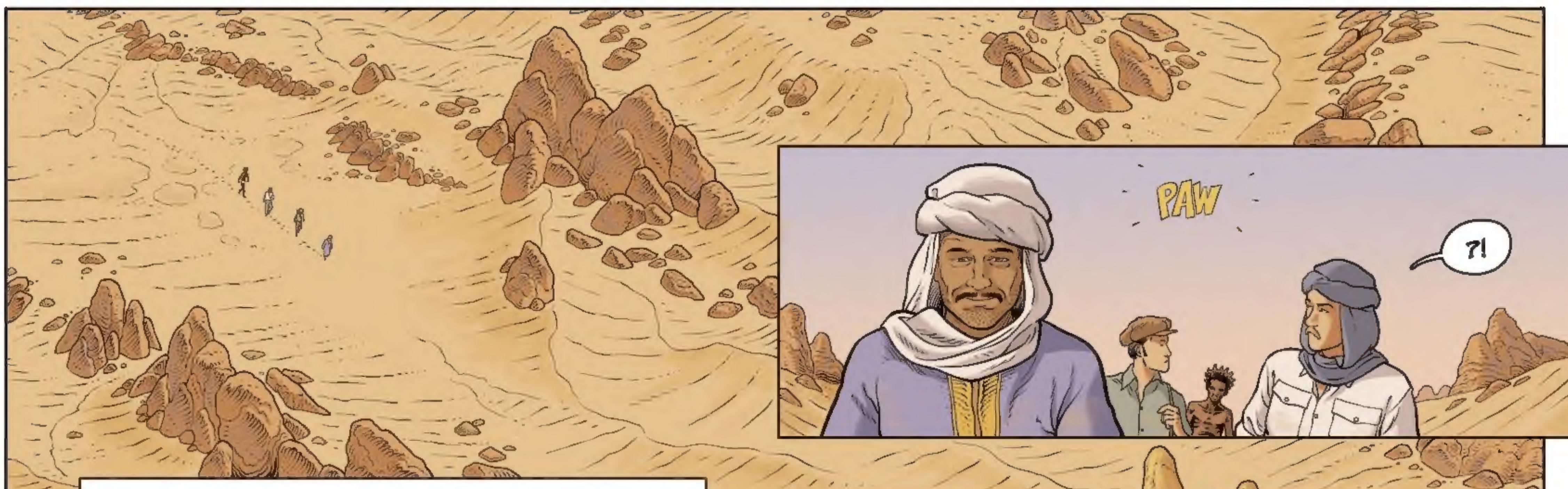




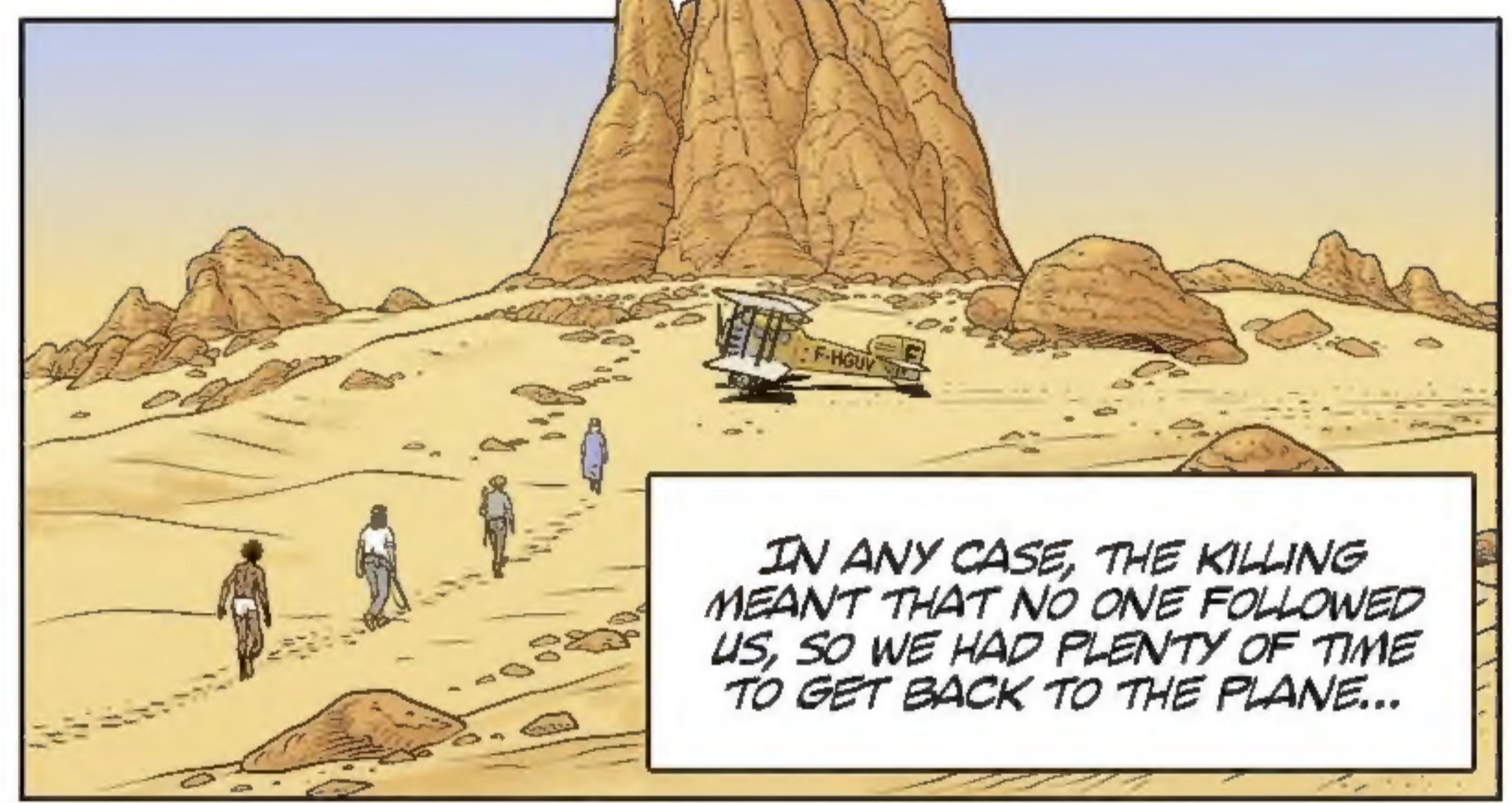




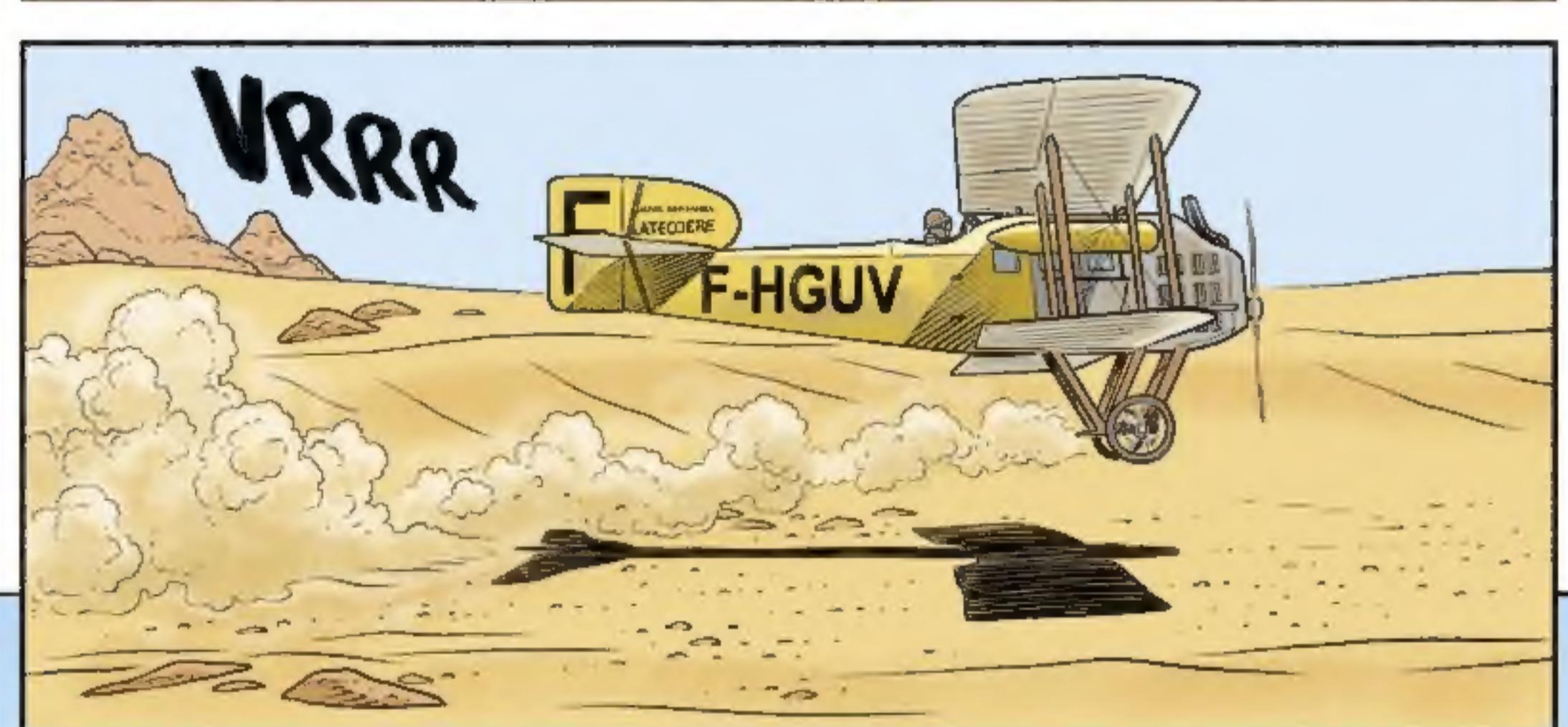
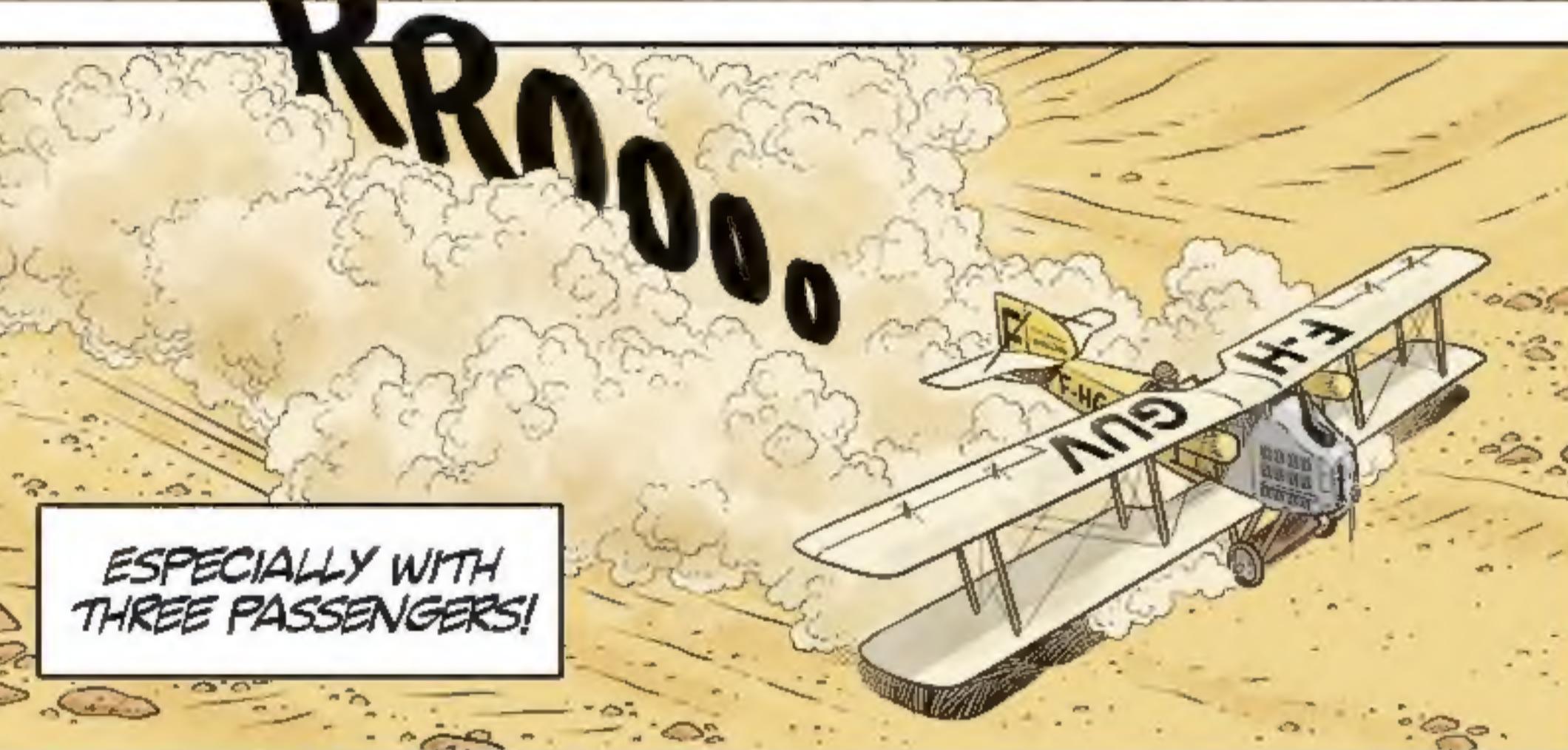
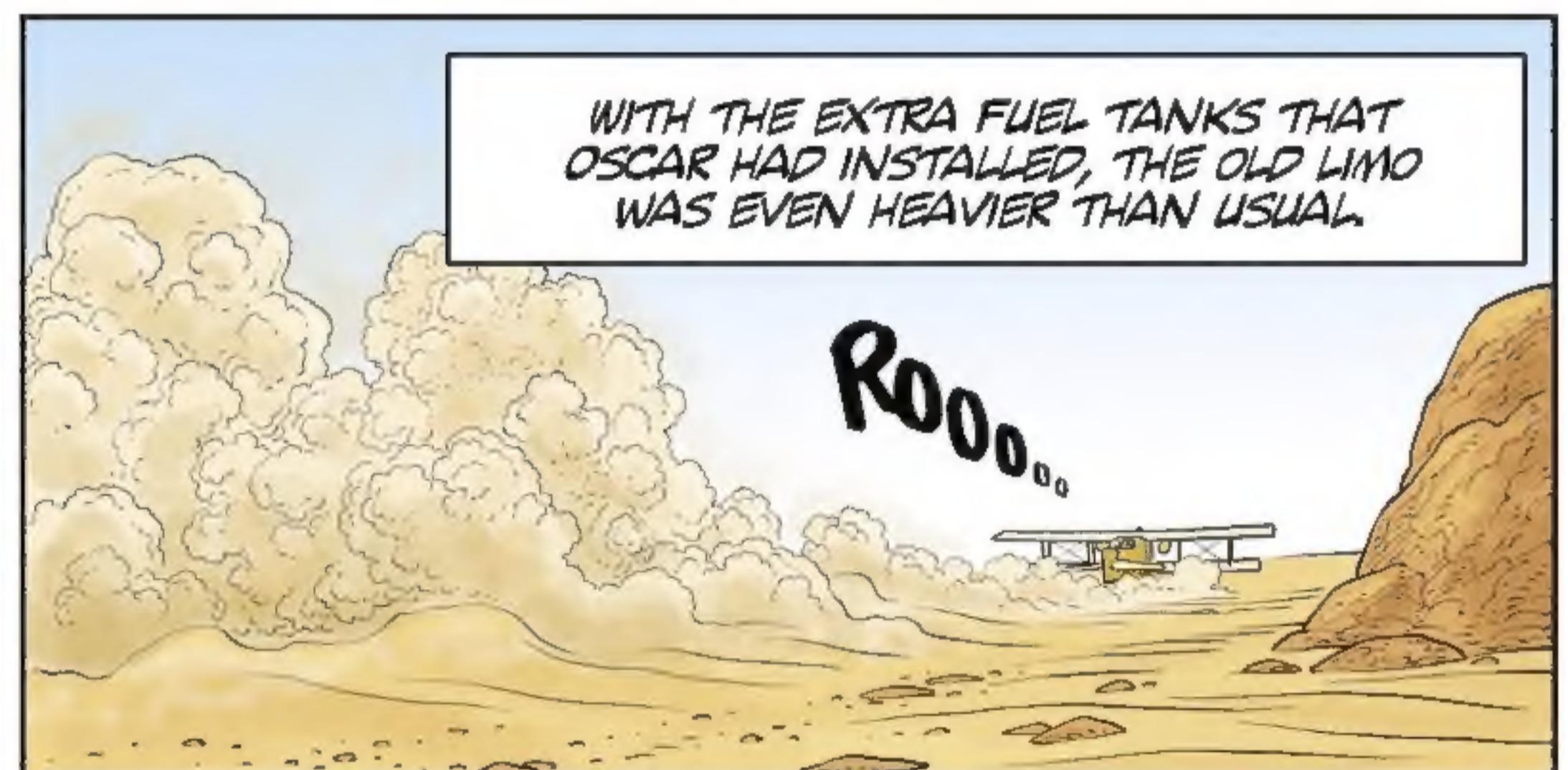




ABDALLAH'S UNCLE HAD PAID FOR HIS CRUELTY.
THE BOY HAD ALL THE MAKINGS OF A CHIEF!

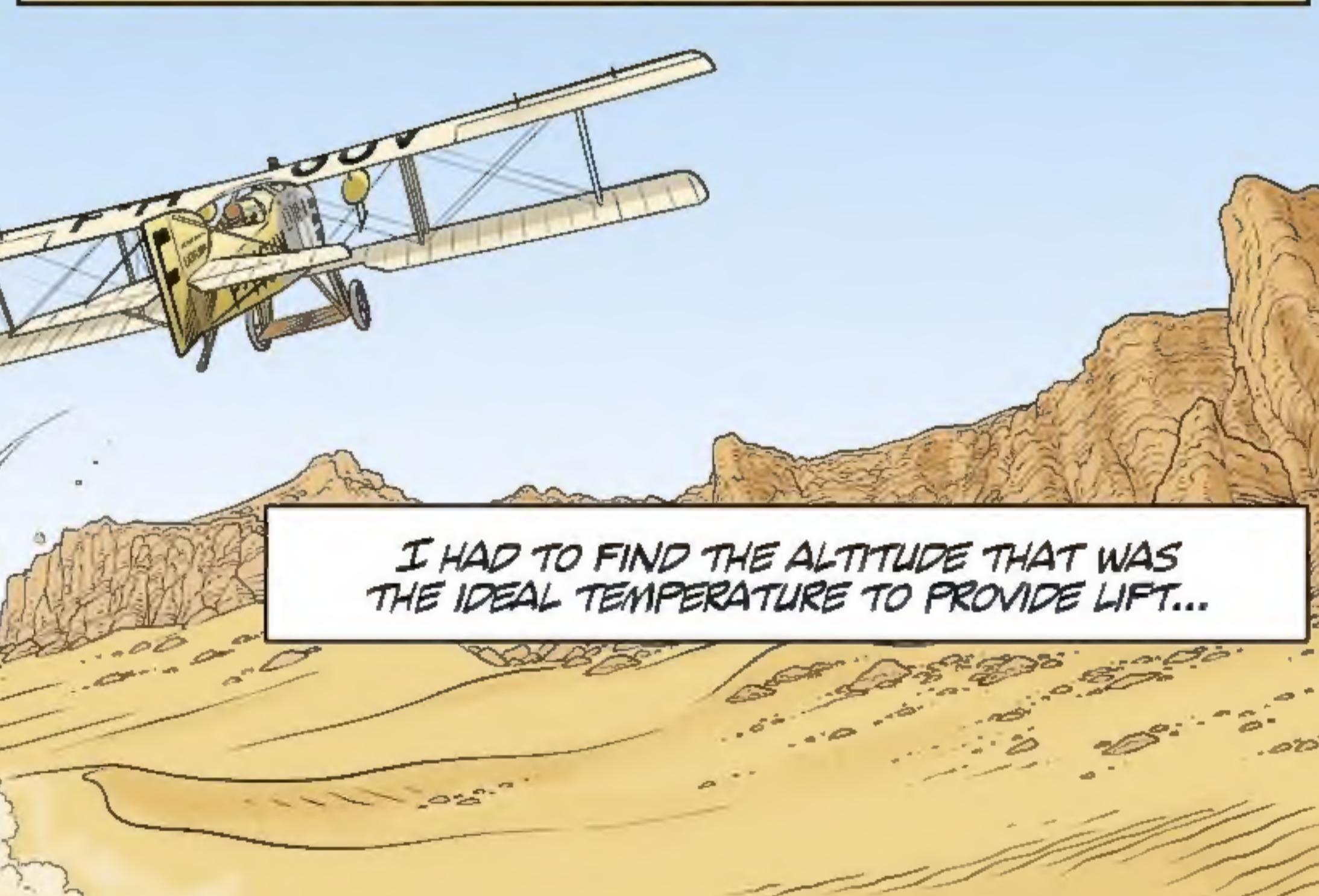


IN ANY CASE, THE KILLING
MEANT THAT NO ONE FOLLOWED
US, SO WE HAD PLENTY OF TIME
TO GET BACK TO THE PLANE...



...AND EXTEND THE "RUNWAY"
ENOUGH FOR IT TO TAKE OFF.

ESPECIALLY WITH
THREE PASSENGERS!



I HAD TO FIND THE ALTITUDE THAT WAS
THE IDEAL TEMPERATURE TO PROVIDE LIFT...

...AND KEEP THE PLANE ON AN INVISIBLE LINE BETWEEN TWO LAYERS OF MOVING AIR. IT WOULD TAKE ALL THE TRICKS OF THE TRADE THAT THE OLD HANDS HAD TAUGHT ME IF WE WERE TO COMPLETE THE LENGTHY FLIGHT THAT LAY AHEAD OF US!

FORTUNE'S ON OUR SIDE... NOT A BREATH OF WIND.

IT WAS OVER 600 MILES TO PORT-ÉTIENNE (1), AND WE'D HAVE TO SKIP THE USUAL STOP AT VILLA CISNEROS, THE LAST SPANISH GARRISON ON THE RÍO DE ORO, WHERE ENRIQUE WOULD'VE BEEN ARRESTED. WE COULD MAKE IT WITH THE EXTRA TANKS (2), BUT I'D STILL HAVE TO USE AS LITTLE FUEL AS POSSIBLE.

THEN IT WAS ON TO SAINT-Louis, WHERE BARK'S FAMILY THREW HIM A PARTY SENEGAL-STYLE... WITH PLENTY OF MUSIC, DANCING, AND FOOD!

WHEN I GOT BACK TO CASABLANCA A WEEK LATER, A BIG SURPRISE WAS WAITING FOR ME...

...ADELE.

AND I MET EUGÈNE, AND LEARNED THE JOYS OF FATHERHOOD.

ONE OF THE GREATEST MOMENTS OF MY LIFE, THAT I'LL NEVER FORGET!

(1) MODERN-DAY NOUADHIBOU IN MAURITANIA.

(2) WITHOUT THEM, A BREGUET XIV HAD A RANGE OF ONLY 400 MILES.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my old friend Marc Dolidier, aviation buff and recreational pilot, for his technical advice and attentive reading.

JCK

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